

# THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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## NEW LIGHT ON THE YOUTH OF DANTE

The author aims at unfolding in historical sequence some of the autobiographical elements in the *Inferno*. In the course of tracing the interesting series of events shadowed forth in the first thirteen cantos of the *Inferno* it is discovered that the medieval concept of hell, hitherto believed to be inherent in the poem, has disappeared. The *Inferno* assumes a new atmosphere charged with the woes not of the dead but of the living. Joachim de Flore had declared that the real hell was the world of this life. It is shown how Dante adapted this concept to illustrate the story of his own life, how beneath the apparent horror of his hell can be discerned actual scenes from medieval life and how under cover as it were of hell fire itself he aimed a blow at the whole doctrine of eternal damnation current in his day.

‘A fascinating work.’—*The Times Literary Supplement*.

# THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

## A STUDY IN THE HETERODOXY OF DANTE

BY,  
GERTRUDE LEIGH

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

TWO OPPOSITE mental attitudes divided the world during the lifetime of Dante: on the one hand blind conformity to the rigid ecclesiastical system enforced by cruel laws; on the other, ardent secret resistance to it, inspired by aspirations towards intellectual liberty. On which side did Dante stand? The examination of this problem has never seriously been undertaken.

The present writer is far indeed from believing herself adequate for the task. She is spurred to the endeavour by the hope that she may rouse some who are better equipped than herself to a revaluation of the evidence relating to his religious beliefs scattered throughout Dante's works.

For readers who desire to gauge for themselves the conditions of life and thought to which allusion is made in the following pages, there are many easily accessible works.

Foremost among them ranks the *Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. VI, 'Victory of the Papacy', which deals exhaustively with the period covered by Dante's early life. Written by scholars whose lives have been devoted to the subject, the volume is the best possible guide from many points of view to the problems and tragedies of the thirteenth century.

By his numerous collections and translations of human documents in the Middle Ages Dr. Coulton has done perhaps more than any writer of the day to bring to light forgotten misconceptions of Christianity. Through his pages some of the things which roused the protests of Dante and his contemporaries and set him to unfold to his generation purer ideals of worship come into view.

None who wish to understand this period should neglect the perusal of Canon Dearmer's *Legend of Hell*, which sheds a lurid light on religious morbidity and its effect on ecclesiastical rule.

For information as to the punitive system of the Church, recourse may be had to Professor Turberville's *Medieval Heresy and the Inquisition*.

Turning to the New Intelligence of Love the reader will

find no work more fruitful and illuminating than Emile Gebhardt's *L'Italie Mystique*.

Miss Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, with other of her works, forms a standard introduction to the study of the nature and development of man's consciousness. It has become possible in recent years to get access in translation to some of the mystics contemporary with Dante, and thus appreciate how closely their thought runs parallel with much in the *Banquet* and *New Life*.

Among these attention should be drawn to Professor Allison Peers' labour of love in translating from the Catalan the works of Ramon Lull. Much in his *Blanquerna* testifies to an ardour for Church reform. Many passages in the *Book of the Lover and the Beloved* are parallel in thought with the *New Life*.

The works of Meister Eckhart are now available in the translation of C. de B. Evans (John Watkins). The poems of *Jacopone da Todi*, reflecting some of the Eucharistic fervour of the *New Life*, have been translated by A. Nelin and N. Craig from *Les poètes franciscains en Italie* of Ozanam.

From Miss Underhill also comes an edition of *John of Ruysbroeck*, translated from the Flemish by C. A. Wynschenck Dom.

Some of the poets of the New Style contemporary with Dante are available in translation, chiefly in collections. The *Sonnets* and *Ballate* of Guido Cavalcanti have been translated by Ezra Pound.

The edition of the *Vita Nuova* published by Dent & Sons in the Temple Classics and interleaved with a literal translation by Mr. Thomas Okey will be found useful for reference. An admirable translation of the *Convivio* by the late Dr. Wicksteed with illuminating notes is published in the same series.

The above are suggested for the use of English readers.

A more detailed list of works used or cited is appended to the companion volume, *New Light on the Youth of Dante*.

Special pains have been taken to make the *Passing of Beatrice* entirely comprehensible to readers unacquainted with the Italian language or with the works of Dante.

# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	ix
I. THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH DANTE WROTE	1
II. HETERODOXY IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY	11
III. INITIATION INTO THE NEW LIFE	24
IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CERTAIN KEY-WORDS	34
V. SELF-DEDICATION	46
VI. THE LADY OF THE SCREEN	52
VII. THE TRUE DEFENCE	63
VIII. THE WEDDING FEAST	76
IX. THE INTERROGATION AND THE ODE	86
X. SHADOWS OF APPROACHING DOOM	97
XI. THE NEW VISION OF BEATRICE	109
XII. THE PASSING OF BEATRICE	119
XIII. DANTE ANNOUNCES HER DEATH TO THE WORLD	127
XIV. THE LAMENT OVER BEATRICE	141
XV. THE LADY AT THE WINDOW	155
XVI. THE CLOSE OF THE SECOND AGE	170
XVII. THE HETERODOXY OF DANTE	182
XVIII. THE WITNESS OF THE 'PARADISO'	190
INDEX OF FIRST LINES	206

## INTRODUCTION

IN HIS youth Dante composed a series of lyrics, linked together by a prose narrative, which he gave to the public under the title of *The New Life*. As love songs, written round the person of a maiden to whom he alluded as Beatrice, although he admitted this was not her real name, the *New Life* at once captivated all his friends and is still hailed as one of the most alluring romances written in any language. Much of it, however, was obscure, and it suggested a mystery which was left unsolved.

Dissatisfied with the meaning assigned to the *New Life* by many, and more particularly perturbed by the gross interpretation of his emotional narrative accepted by some, Dante set himself a few years later to write an explanation of the Odes contained in it. He called this work *The Banquet*, and apparently meant it to be a complete account in twelve books of his views on theology, philosophy and world government.

The *Banquet*, however, as it has come down to us, stops short after the fourth book; whether because the author wrote no more of it, or because the remaining books were destroyed by order of the authorities, there is no evidence to determine.

Many parts of the *New Life* betray a religious undercurrent. This was sufficiently marked to induce the Inquisitor who licensed an early edition printed in Florence in 1576<sup>1</sup> to 'revise' the text by excising or modifying allusions to the Deity, quotations from Scripture, and words with sacred associations. A description of Beatrice passing by in the street, for instance, with people exclaiming she was 'no woman, but one of the angels of Heaven' was altered to 'she is like an angel of Heaven'. The Inquisitorial corrections aimed at expunging any suggestion that a deeper purpose lay within than was apparent on the surface.

The religious and mystic element was, however, too closely engrained in the *New Life* to escape observation. And when

<sup>1</sup> See *Vita Nuova* da Michele Barbi, pp. 78, 79.

Dante took up the same theme in the *Banquet*, and explained line by line the Odes which dealt with the *New Life* period, he clearly pronounced that his purpose in writing the former book was to reveal Divine truth, and not to delineate earthly passion. Very cautiously, with infinite skill in the art of disguising—an art he tells us that he highly esteemed—he had intimated in the *New Life* that the story he had to relate was no purely personal narrative, but concerned the whole world. Now in the *Banquet* he went further, and told his readers in what manner he had disguised his purpose. He was very anxious they should discover his real meaning, and deplored the fact that he was still unable to tell them in plain language what it was.

The imperative need for all this caution and Dante's complete justification for the use of obscure and difficult language have only in comparatively recent years come into the open. For generations the story of Dante's life has continued to be set before his readers without the smallest reference to the most poignant and dominant factor in the social framework of his times.

In order to see in a dry light the products of his genius and form an adequate judgment on the methods he adopted in prose and verse, there must be at least some understanding of the forces which were at work to suppress or distort whatever he gave to the world. In the pitched battle between the intellect of Dante and the measureless powers of the Inquisition—a battle which was waged from his youth till the day of his death—it can be seen now that he triumphed all along the line. He said what he meant to say. He said it for the most part in his own tongue, which he thereby brought into the foremost rank as a literary medium for all ages to come. He struck such blows against the spiritual wickedness in high places which corrupted the Church as daunted his foes. He laid the foundation of a purer Reformation than has yet seen accomplishment, and boldly advocated reforms, at that time denounced as heretical, which, after centuries of delay, have seen accomplishment. His highest aim was to bring back Christianity to the Wisdom of the Founder, to obliterate from men's minds the poisoned concept of a wrathful Creator and to draw mankind to universal peace through the vivifying love of the Holy Spirit.

How could this be achieved while those who held the world at will were all on the other side, pledged to enforce

## INTRODUCTION

the doctrines he strove to refute, endowed with measureless power to censor or destroy every word he wrote?

In a previous work<sup>1</sup> the present writer attempted an examination into the *Inferno*, conducted on the hypothesis that Dante had developed in it the Joachist theory that Hell, the 'abyss of woe', is neither more nor less than the actual evil world, wherein the source of men's misery lies in surrender to their own lusts and to the tyranny of bad rulers. Before publishing the continuation of Dante's life as it is found to correspond with the incidents recorded in the *Inferno*, it has seemed expedient to expose more explicitly the trend of his philosophy and the extent of his heterodoxy, judged from the standpoint of thirteenth-century beliefs. Much of this centres round the figure of Beatrice, his early adoration of her beauty, his distressful awakening to her approaching departure from earth, and his surrender to a new influence which brought him in the end not only new bliss, but also renewed communion with the transcendent nobility of his first love.

The figure of Beatrice is presented throughout as a theme which concerns all mankind. But at the outset attention is artfully riveted with a delightful simplicity on the feature of Dante's personal devotion to his child love. Thus the reader starts primed with romantic expectation, and unconsciously shapes the narrative to clothe this thought. He is apt to pass over in half-impatient bewilderment the continual mystic interpolations which were meant to throw light upon the central theme.

Only by degrees, in sudden illuminating phrases and in the mystic murmur of dream and vision, is the divinity of Beatrice revealed, and her identity with the Holy Eucharistic Miracle, whose passing from earth men were then awaiting with awe.

The plan was so far successful that the Inquisition suffered the *New Life* to see the light. Inquisitors either failed to grasp its dangerous implications, or they were persuaded that the general public would ignore all but the love story. Or, a third possibility, it may have been so widely copied and secretly handed about before the authorities got wind of it that a formal edict of suppression would only have stimulated attention to its illicit purpose.

<sup>1</sup> *New Light on the Youth of Dante*, by Gertrude Leigh (Faber & Faber, 1929).

In the following pages we propose to examine the *New Life* in the light thrown upon it by the *Banquet*, and on the assumption (which rests on Dante's avowed acceptance of Joachim's prophecies) that it is a Joachist document, designed to mark the long-pretended withdrawal of the Holy Eucharist from a world not worthy of this great miracle.

The depth and intellectual importance of the Joachist movement towards reform in the thirteenth century has attracted less attention from Dante students than it deserves. Dante's own part in it has been consistently ignored. The same all-controlling power which vainly struggled to silence him altogether availed to throw a cloak of ignominy over those who took part in it, the Friars loyal to their rule, the Spirituals in the Church and other intrepid seekers after truth. They figure in the annals of their times as squalid fanatics, holding grotesque opinions, a danger to themselves and to the State, too despicable for aught but the dungeon, the torture chamber and the stake.

Yet among the ranks of the Joachists are to be reckoned at least one Pope, several cardinals, countless noted ecclesiastics, three emperors, divers powerful princes, nobles of high degree and great ladies, renowned philosophers, statesmen, poets and men of science, not to mention the tale of humble monks and martyrs.

If Dante, too, was one of them, if he were the author of heretical books, the prime instigator, as we believe, in the anti-papal movement of his day, it may at least be confidently asserted that he made one of an honourable company.

It may not be unnecessary to state that no system of cipher, no tampering with the text, is involved in this discussion of Dante's genuine purpose in the *New Life*. The interpretation suggested arises solely out of indications plainly furnished by Dante himself and corresponding indications supplied by contemporary writers.

## CHAPTER I

### THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH DANTE WROTE

It is a familiar truism that the works of Dante must be approached through the atmosphere in which they were written. It is by no means easy, however, to make this approach. Some five centuries elapsed before unfettered Dante criticism may be said to have come into being, and by that time religious speculations had ceased to engross the student of letters. Dante's religious convictions came to be accepted without much investigation as a relic of the Dark Ages.

The cause which operated to seal his own lips from divulging his true opinions about certain religious dogmas current in his age continued for centuries to silence the few who understood at once his language and his mode of writing.

Extreme caution marks the very early commentators. They often confine their efforts to guesses, oddly contradictory one of another, about the identity of the named and unnamed *dramatis personae*. They furnish a good deal of curious information. They leave the main secret theme where they found it, in obscurity.

It was not until comparatively recent times that Italian scholars found themselves at liberty to comment freely on Dante's work. Modern Dante scholarship has adhered perhaps too closely to the explanations and suggestions furnished in the past by students who wrote under restraints but dimly realised in the present age.

The heavy cloud of misunderstanding which has drifted between Dante and his readers is partly due to the circumstance that within two centuries of his death the mode of thought out of which the *Divina Commedia* arose had suffered complete eclipse. By the middle of the sixteenth century the Renaissance had completely transformed the intellectual outlook of Europe. An enticing field of scholarship had been opened up into which minds, hitherto subject to arbitrary



restrictions in every branch of knowledge, could find free pasturage. The new treasures of Greek literature, unlike the works of Aristotle when introduced to enquiring minds in the thirteenth century, came into no collision with orthodoxy. Popes and cardinals were among the most ardent students of the new learning, and the whole tenor of education became transformed under the actual aegis of Churchmen. The effect was to fix a gulf, never yet adequately bridged, between the modes of expression forced upon students in an earlier Renaissance and those of the later period, when the Inquisition area of operation was more restricted.

For Dante and his compeers no branch of intellectual effort lay open in which to exercise independent judgment. They were obstructed in all their studies by professors, ecclesiastical one and all, who were persuaded that heresy lurked in every motion of the mind towards the attainment of truth. More particularly was Dante thwarted in his efforts to establish the use of the 'vulgar tongue'. Every line he wrote in his own language was subject to suspicion and censure. Much has quite obviously been destroyed. He worked all his life within the narrow limits imposed upon him by the cause he openly deplored but could not name. It was fatally familiar to readers and writers alike.<sup>1</sup>

It is beyond dispute that the powers entrusted to the officials of the Holy Office for the suppression of heresy have at various times in the history of the Church been turned to very ill account. During the century after its first institution its operations were no less disastrous than they became at a later period, but its facilities for the suppression of adverse comment were immeasurably greater prior to the invention of printing. Hence its effect upon the world of letters and, in particular, on the work of Dante has attracted little attention. It is strictly true to say that he lived under a reign of terror.

From the early days of Christianity the duty of maintaining sound doctrine and punishing such as erred wilfully from the faith rested in the jurisdiction of the Bishops. When in 1233 Gregory IX took 'cognisance of heresy' out of the Bishops' hands and delivered it to special commissioners, he unwittingly inaugurated a system destined to work perhaps more widespread misery than any other institution yet devised by man.

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. 1, c. 3.

It is important to remember that at the time of Dante's birth the Inquisition was of comparatively recent introduction and was by no means universally approved in the Church. The Bishops strongly opposed it. The Dominicans to whose Order it was at first entrusted were most reluctant to undertake it. Their fears were well founded. A ruthless type of Dominican came into being whose proceedings made them so obnoxious, in Florence especially, that Innocent IV was forced to call in the aid of the Franciscan Order and divide the various districts placed under the Holy Office between Inquisitors chosen out of each Order. It is apparent that the Minor Friars, from this time on, were torn by internal dissension and began to lose the respect and affection of the people. The holding of a lucrative office such as that of Inquisitor was in fact directly forbidden by the rule of poverty binding on all the brethren and the Papal dispensation was held by many of them to be *ultra vires* and an attack on their rule.

The powers conferred upon Inquisitors enabled them to become of overwhelming importance not only in their own Orders, but also in the Papal Curia itself. Inquisitors were made independent of the Bishops in their own districts; they were released from obedience to the provincials and generals of their own Orders; they owed no obedience to Papal legates and held office practically for life, unaffected by an interregnum in the Sacred Chair.

The use of torture, sanctioned by the Lateran Council of 1215, was definitely ordered by the Bull of Innocent IV in 1252, and became universal. There is evidence that certain Inquisitors were regarded by their own contemporaries as wantonly cruel. When attempts were made to restrain them from barbarous practices, they threatened to accuse their own superiors of heresy.

It is not necessary in this place to describe the system which in a short space of time made the Inquisition tribunals a byword of execration throughout the world. But we venture to call attention to its close connection with the principles involved in the *Legend of Hell*<sup>1</sup> at that time diligently preached to the people by ecclesiastical authority. It would seem that there was ever before the eyes of the special commissioners chosen to purify the faith the image of a God of wrath Who destined all His creatures, innocent

<sup>1</sup> See *The Legend of Hell*, by Dr. Percy Dearmer (Cassell & Co., 1929).

and guilty alike, to ceaseless torment for all eternity unless they were provided with a talisman of salvation which few could obtain. It was an age when the penal code both of the municipality and the territorial noble was cruel, and when the spectacle of suffering gave savage delight to the rabble. But the methods commonly in force for the retribution of criminals were far outdone by the men employed to extirpate heresy. Even so they fell very far short of the devices ascribed to the Creator for terrorising mankind. The tree of corrupt belief nurtured by successive generations had brought forth evil fruit indeed.

Within ten years of its founding the Inquisition displayed its full force in a campaign directed against the Patarini in Florence and the surrounding country. It was computed that about a third of the inhabitants of Florence at this time were disaffected towards the Church. The Dominican Inquisitor, Peter the Martyr (for he was assassinated in the end), purged the city by enrolling a band of Catholic nobles against the burgher heretics. There was a massacre in the streets. The stake was a familiar horror. Even women and children were burnt alive at Poppi and Prato. The Patarini made submission to the Church, though the genuineness of their conversion may be open to doubt. But there were others.

The Emperor Frederick II had made his court a refuge for men who strove for liberty of thought and speech. His tolerant attitude was shared by many of the Ghibelline nobles and their followers. When the Emperor died Innocent IV had written to Peter the Martyr, 'Now at last we can think of destroying heresy'. But he was a bad psychologist. Heretical opinions continued to increase under a system which began to reckon all political opponents as heretics. Within a short while, too, the Joachist tenets which had permeated the whole structure of the Church fell under the ban of Rome, with the result that a host of loyal Churchmen found themselves in the position of 'suspects'. The number of people whose opinions exposed them to persecution multiplied year by year.

Dante, brought up in unquestioning loyalty to the Church, deeply responsive to its glorious traditions and ritual, was surrounded by men who vividly remembered the tribulation brought upon the city by the Dominican Inquisitor. Till the end of the century Florence remained definitely hostile

towards the Inquisition. The municipality on occasion opposed its operations. The Bishop warmly espoused the cause of the Franciscan monks who had fallen under suspicion. But the battle for liberty of conscience was a losing one. The Inquisition grew steadily more formidable.

Dante was twelve years old when, in 1277, the Inquisition rose to its full height of power in the Church by the election of the Grand Inquisitor to the Papal chair under the name of Nicholas III. It was he whom in later years Dante was to bring upon the scene in the role of a damned soul summoning three of his successors to retribution.<sup>1</sup> Nicholas found the Holy Office on his accession an elaborate and well-equipped organisation, and devoted his attention at once to stimulate its activities and to use it for the purpose of stifling such intellectual stirrings as he believed to be the work of the devil. It was he who consigned the aged Roger Bacon to perpetual imprisonment and condemned the labours pursued by him under the aegis of former Pontiffs. And among those he brought to judgment was Petrus Johannis Olivi, miraculously saved from condemnation by the eloquence which turned his judges to adherents.

The work of repression was pursued even more vigorously when Nicholas IV, General of the Franciscan Order, ascended the Papal throne in 1288. A strong supporter of the Holy Office Nicholas directed his attention to suppressing the manifestations of intellectual activity in the schools of the monastic orders and in the universities. He strengthened the power of Inquisitors, and established new devices for extirpating the opinions he feared.

The measures of Nicholas III and Nicholas IV are of particular interest because they synchronise with the period in Dante's life covered by the *New Life*. During part of this time he was receiving instruction in the schools of the monasteries and at the university. He was therefore directly involved in the campaign of suspicion directed by Nicholas IV against the younger and more enthusiastic monks and students. The Holy Office had already in its employ a long chain of officials, who stretched down from the Chief Inquisitors in every district and their assistants, extended to an ever-increasing body of inferior officers, familiars and informers, and ended at the lowest extremity with the creatures who carried out the sentences inflicted, gaolers,

<sup>1</sup> *Inferno*, xix, 31 ff.

torturers and the like. In addition to its own officers, the Holy Office was in a position to exercise overwhelming influence in filling vacant offices in the Church. By this means all the learned professions came to be permeated with men who owed promotion to the dominant faction and were pledged on pain of deprivation to aid in the general hunt for heretics.

In every monastery, every school and university a ceaseless silent espionage was set on foot. Every action of the student's life was reported to the Inquisitor, what company he kept, how each hour was spent, what things even he ate and drank, for abstinence and temperance, even a preference for certain kinds of food, might throw light on the character. More especially note would be taken of the books for which he asked, and as he read he might find an inquisitive eye peering over his shoulder. Someone, rummaging among his private papers, secretly copied the letters he wrote to his friends, listened while he jested, observed him while he prayed. Most insidious of all might prove the sympathy of some fellow-student, leading him on by a seemingly unguarded word to reveal his secret thoughts. No accusation, no forewarning might be given, until suddenly the bolt would fall. The student's place would be empty. His friends would see him no more unless perhaps his emaciated features should be dimly discerned above the garment of painted flames on his way to the stake to perish in one of those ghastly scenes staged in public to augment men's terror.

From the time when Dante felt the first irresistible impulse to express his thoughts to the day of his death the censorship of the Inquisition was never relaxed. The close surveillance of all he wrote followed him through life and impeded him to the last even while under the protection of Guido Novello da Polenta when he was completing the *Paradiso* at Ravenna.

Dante was strongly persuaded that the Roman Church during his lifetime had passed under the ascendancy of evil-minded men who were using its immense resources for their own ends. In the tremendous canto of *Paradiso*<sup>1</sup> in which St. Peter arraigns the rulers of the Church and likens Rome to a sink of iniquity, this opinion emerges without disguise. There is strong reason to infer that the root of the evil in the eyes of Dante and others of his generation lay in the hidden

<sup>1</sup> *Paradiso*, xxvii.

subversive control exercised in the councils of the Church by the Inquisition. By privileges rashly conferred on the Holy Office through the action of Popes who had succumbed to their dominion, Inquisition officials had come to exercise overwhelming influence, and to use it not for the good of the Church, but to increase their own wealth and power. This may be plainly perceived by consideration of the extraordinary series of violent deeds carried out by the Curia during Dante's lifetime under pretext of the extirpation of heresy.

In former days heresy had been carefully and moderately defined as 'opinions chosen by human reason, contrary to Holy Scripture, openly taught, pertinaciously defended'. Resort to the Holy Scriptures was rendered inoperative for all save the few by the rigorous ban placed by the Inquisition on all translations of the text from the Latin version. But, in fact, as may be seen from Inquisitors' reports, little if any stress was laid on doctrinal matters in trials for heresy. Campaigns against heresy tended more and more to become Crusades against groups of individuals who had fallen under Papal displeasure, or whose possessions were coveted.

Having once started on its course the Inquisition grew within a few years to an engine of destruction imbued with an all-corroding life of its own, against which all the resources of piety and prudent statesmanship within the Church were powerless.

After the short reign of the Spiritual Pope Celestine V, followed the cruel persecution of the monks he had ruled as Abbot, and the expulsion of all his adherents. A Crusade was preached against the Colonna Cardinals, their beautiful city Praeneste was given up to plunder, completely demolished and burnt to the ground. All their adherents were tracked down as heretics. The punitive measures adopted against Florence, the unsuccessful Crusade against Sicily, the terrible rigours of the siege of Pistoia all betray the same hidden hand dictating Papal policy. Under Clement V, in the suppression of the Templars, horror was carried to the highest pitch. Greed and cruelty were outdone by the persecutors. In the midst of the long-drawn-out tortures of the Templars came the sudden Crusade by land and sea against the Venetians throughout the world, during which they were given up by the Church to universal plunder and outrage.

The momentary hopes of peace kindled by the election of the Emperor Henry VII were soon dashed by the same sinister influence. His death, reputed by poison, left all his adherents under the imputation of heretical leanings, a prey to ceaseless persecution. And John XXII, by his comprehensive edict against every kind of opponent for whom he could find terms of opprobrium, divided Christendom definitely, so Dante declared through the lips of St. Peter, into two groups—the persecutors and the persecuted.

It may be comparatively easy to write with studied ‘tolerance of intolerance’ six centuries after such accumulated wrongs. Such an attitude is not to be expected from the participators in the sufferings they entailed. The men of probity whose lot it was to see such deeds perpetrated in the name of religion were driven to the conclusion that the Church, the great bulwark of Christianity, had been captured by the enemies of Christ. Their only hope lay in the long-prophesied break-up of the Roman hierarchy and the inauguration of a purer system.

How do men write under such conditions? We hold the answer in our hands. The works of Dante and of his contemporaries afford abundant testimony to their methods.

In the first place it is interesting to observe that they did not surrender their principles under threat of persecution. The censorship exercised over writings in the language of the people was more close and jealous by far than that relating to Latin productions. It was in Italian that Dante and the poets of the New Style chose to write. Study of the Scriptures was restricted and impeded. Dante was saturated with knowledge of the Bible to a degree which testifies to continuous application. All his arguments rest on Scriptural authority.

Ever since Italy had been darkened by the shadow of the Inquisition men had begun to devise means to communicate with each other and with their public in a style which should be intelligible to themselves without giving offence to Rome. The increased vigilance of the Inquisitors as the century wore to its close stimulated their wits still further. Open revolt was impossible. They matched their wits against their persecutors, and were able by a system of disguised writing to say pretty nearly what they liked.

Disguised writing is a very old device. It is also a very modern safety valve for an oppressed people living under a

military despotism. We quote one simple example from Mr. Brand Whitlock's book on the German Occupation of Belgium.

In *Le Quotidien*, one of the censored sheets, there appeared (in 1917) a little article which filled Brussels with amazement and delight.

'Spring is not yet here despite the fatidical day of March 21. Once or twice already our hopes have been disappointed. What matter?—Astronomy is an exact science and it is mathematically certain. His return also is written in the eternal dial of time, and when he makes his triumphal entry into his good city of Brussels after having waited so long, so impatiently, our joy will be all the greater. That will be the feast of the Sun, the feast of flowers, and the soul of a whole people will commune with Him.'

The literal, unimaginative German censor never suspected until the spies, listening at some keyhole in town, got inkling of the fact that it was an *article à double entente*.

The use of double writing in serious literature can be justified only by a state of affairs which has divided society into divergent sections, holding opposite opinions and aspirations; the one section all-powerful, dominant and ruthless, the other section capable of no open resistance, yet influential and intellectually superior to its oppressors.

The course of events during the thirteenth century had brought about exactly this state of affairs at the time when Dante began his literary career. The awakening effect of Joachism, the new inspiration set stirring by the followers of Francis and Dominic, the amazing impact of Aristotelian ideas on a theology cramped during the Dark Ages, the challenging criticism of heretical preachers of the Gospel, the ruin of countless old families, now excommunicate, all these factors had their part in forming a great expectant public, made up of every class in the community, united only in their thirst for knowledge and their discontent with Rome. To meet this situation, the Popes whom Dante denounced could find no better resource than the Inquisition. By aid of this they could close every outlet for expression outside the narrow limits prescribed by orthodoxy, and could suppress whatever appeared in any way subversive. They could keep their own band of subservient writers, and dictate to them whatever it seemed good should be said. Thus the



country. But there were many failures. Orthodox doctrine denied that the unworthiness of the priest could annul the Divine powers conferred on him by ordination, and this was a stumbling-block to many. Licentious, brutal or dishonest priests left in almost limitless power over the souls of men cannot fail to destroy belief in the spiritual gifts bestowed by ordination. Compulsory submission to the authority of such an one, since it is psychology, not reasoning, which carries the day, will stir the indifferent to mockery, the pious to revolt.

The introduction and gradual enforcement of clerical celibacy gave occasion for open and continuous scandal in the ranks of a reluctant priesthood, such as was quite incompatible with lay reverence for the pastor of the flock. Pope Hildebrand, 1073, actually warned the laity not to attend Mass celebrated by priests who kept a concubine or *sub-introducta*. But such independence on the part of the laity was not tolerated two centuries later. St. Bonaventura excuses the Bishops for not removing evil priests on the ground that another equally worthless would probably take his place, and laments that he must hold his tongue about their iniquities lest 'if the people altogether lost faith in the clergy, heretics would arise and draw the people to themselves—boasting that, as it were by our own testimony, the clergy were so vile that none obey them or care for their teaching'. That in effect was exactly what happened. The hushing-up policy was never successful.

The extraordinary growth in disaffection towards the Church observable in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was stimulated, it would appear, by fundamental alterations made by Papal decree in the powers and status of the clergy. In earlier ages the power of the Keys was held to rest exclusively with the Bishop or was extended only to missionary priests. The doctrine that pardon for sin cannot be obtained without confession to a priest dates not earlier than the eleventh century. From this period, the bestowal of the Holy Ghost, conferring power to bind or loose, began to be a part of the ordination of priests. These powers were further enlarged in the thirteenth century.

At the Lateran Council in 1215 Innocent III made the momentous pronouncement that penance was incumbent as a duty on every Christian, and that confession to a priest at least once a year was obligatory as a passport to pardon. At the same time confession was made compulsory before the

reception of Holy Communion. Terrible temptation to misuse his holy office for private gain was set in the way of the priest by the power now extended to him to remit part of the enjoined penance as compensation for 'good works', which in practice stood for a money payment as an 'indulgence'. Extortionate priests, loudly and continually denounced by their Bishops, turned the exceptional powers entrusted to them to the worst uses. The conviction, which ranked as heresy, that no such men could possibly possess the supernatural gifts conferred by virtue of the act of ordination spread far and wide. The new decrees imposing compulsory penance, compulsory confession, were unacceptable to a very large body of loyal Catholics who for over a century conformed to them if at all with great reluctance only on severe pressure. The cost of the numerous religious observances prescribed by law was rendered ruinous by rapacious priests.

Most fertile in stirring the greed of evil priests and monks, most obnoxious to the well-instructed Churchman, was the notion of Purgatory which came into being at this time and became a disastrous support to the recently introduced doctrines of penance and satisfaction for sin. Innocent III himself strongly censured 'the indiscreet and superfluous indulgences which some prelates of the Churches are not afraid to grant, whereby the Keys of the Church are made contemptible'; but the Lateran Council rather regularised the sale than put an end to the radical abuses it provoked. The thirteenth century witnessed a serious aggravation of the evil in the hands of unscrupulous begging friars. It was found impossible to prevent such men from playing on the fears of purgatorial pains fomented among the rich and poor alike by Church officials. It was an aspect of Christianity which inspired disgust alike in the faithful and in the enemies of the faith. The sale of indulgences spread like a dry rot, corrupting and degrading all who touched it.

It cannot be regarded as negligible in the gradual alienation of the educated from attachment to their Church that this age witnessed a lamentable multiplication of sham relics, sham miracles, freely used for money-making purposes by priests and monks. Men were certainly not less shrewd in those days than they are at the present time. Indeed in matters relating to religious observances there is plenty of evidence to show they were more keen and critical than they

are now. The fables circulated as sacred, the exposure for devotional purposes of images reputed to have miraculous properties, the use of manufactured relics as charms, called forth rebukes from some of the highest dignitaries of the Church. Such things provoked inevitably the scorn of reasonable men. But they were not authoritatively abolished. So that in the end they often came to be reckoned as belonging to the Catholic Faith, to deny any part of which ranked as heresy.

For some centuries after the founding of the Christian Church Latin continued to be the common language of the people in Italy, who found continuous instruction in the Gospels appointed to be read. But by slow degrees Latin had become meaningless to the great majority of worshippers, and by the thirteenth century we have Dante's word for the fact that only about one in a thousand could understand it. By the strict prohibition of any translation of the sacred text, and by the grave difficulty of obtaining, even in Latin, a copy of the Gospels, the laity were practically cut off from access to the life and words of Christ. It proved impossible to keep the love of Christ and His Church alive in the hearts of the people without this powerful auxiliary. Sermons in the vernacular became denunciations. Any reference to the promises of the Saviour came to savour of heresy in the judgment of authority. Recoil from a harsh and exacting system, reared on a creed which had been shorn of its irresistible appeal and was harshly expounded, followed as a matter of course.

Again, the lack of wisdom displayed by certain Popes in their foreign policy had an unfortunate effect in stirring opposition towards the Church. In Italy large tracts of country became disaffected, the peasants siding, as they were in fact compelled to do, with their territorial lords. The engine of excommunication recklessly applied provoked general scepticism. Loss of belief in the efficacy of the Papal curse opened the way for doubts about the fate of unbaptised infants, or the righteous heathen, or the unabsolved penitent, in short about orthodox doctrines of damnation. If the Pope were manifestly wrong in politics, it was hard to believe he could be infallibly right in everything else. In short, an atmosphere unfavourable to the rigid dogmatic control of Rome was fostered by the worldly ambition of the Papal Curia.

Widely disseminated as were many of the above opinions, they yet lacked coherence and driving force. It was left to the Abbot Joachim de Flore to shake the foundations of orthodoxy, and bring about a definite cleavage in the Western Church which has continued down to the present day. It was directly due to his prophecies and to his followers, among whom was Dante, that the Roman hierarchy lost its unique claim to obedience in spiritual matters and fell into the second place in the history of religious thought.

The Abbot was neither revolutionary nor schismatic. He spent his life in unresisting conformity with the existing system, although he clearly recognised and powerfully exposed its defects. He was the friend of more than one Pope and enjoyed their high esteem. In 1203 he submitted all his writings to the judgment of the Holy See, and died shortly after in the odour of sanctity and in full communion with the Church. Indeed, by Papal Bull ten years later he was formally recognised as orthodox. These facts gave remarkable impetus to his prophetic utterances, for they procured them entrance into the very heart of the Catholic Church.

The doctrine of the Three Ages on which the teaching of Joachim was based opened up a new ray of hope to tortured Christendom, and became for over two centuries the pivot on which the religious aspiration of the civilised world was to turn. To the First Age of the Father, figured in Jewish History, the Age of the Law and Fear, had succeeded not without bitter persecution the Second Age of the Son, the Age of Grace and Faith, figured in the words of Christ and His Apostles. To this was soon to succeed the Age of the Spirit, the Age of Love and Liberty. Definitely Joachim forecast that in the New Age the whole Roman hierarchy—Pope, prelates, priests—would be effaced or would efface itself: that the Sacraments would be withdrawn: that new and spiritual teachers, vowed to poverty and contemplation, would arise and become endowed with wisdom exceeding even that of the Apostles. He connected the dawn of the New Age with the appearance of a new Order of monks, and, later on, this prophecy was hailed by Dominicans and Franciscans alike as a reference to the Mendicant Orders founded shortly after his death.

Joachim's message appears to have reached his followers in the thirteenth century, not as a coherent whole, but in fragments, diligently collected and copied out. From his

various writings, composed at different times, full of obscurity and often detached from their context, eager students found it possible to select certain utterances as a basis for a new theology. It began to be evident that Joachim's prophecies reflected some of the unorthodox tenets which had long smouldered unavowed in the minds of Churchmen. The approaching abolition<sup>1</sup> of the sacerdotal and sacramental system which he foretold was tantamount to a declaration that these were no permanent feature of God's purpose for mankind, no exclusive means of grace, outside which all were doomed to perish but were merely a part of a wider Divine dispensation. To the acute intellects of that logical age it was at once apparent that if Baptism were not in the New Age to be an indispensable passport to salvation, it never could have been that in the past. It was impossible to believe that the Creator changed His mind from time to time, welcomed to Heaven in one era all innocent babes, but excluded most of them from bliss in another, as ironically described by Dante through the lips of St. Bernard.<sup>2</sup>

The influence of Joachim went far to weaken the tendency of the laity to depend for salvation on the priesthood and on the performance of prescribed quasi-mechanical acts of devotion. He gave immense stimulus to individual study of the Bible, and thus indirectly fostered the growing popular demand for access to it in the vulgar tongue. His devotion to St. John's Gospel and Epistles was caught up by the Franciscans, and it seems very probable that the early monks in their unrestricted ministrations helped to spread the words of Christ among the people in their own tongue.

Joachim's great achievement was to shift the centre of Christian teaching anew from Fear to Love. In this many coadjutors, taking their inspiration from him, passed on the torch from one to another. Gradually there opened up before the minds of his followers a new vision of the Godhead in presence of which the old inhibitions, the dreary doctrinal theories of a Creator compelled by some mysterious necessity to take vengeance on His creatures, ceased to convince. Under the new thoughts, suggested if not defined by Joachim, the narrow boundaries, once thought to rescue from perdition the little company alone of the orthodox redeemed, expanded till limits to the Love of God disappeared. The laborious structure, reared by theologians, of

<sup>1</sup> The date first suggested was 1260.

<sup>2</sup> *Para.*, xxxii, 76.

sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, of penance and indulgences, of merit stored up in the Treasure House of the Pope, of curses, torture and terror, fell to the ground. The indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit, pledge of Love, reward of the pure in heart, was to mark the dawn of the New Age.

Some of the beliefs which emerge out of the great religious ferment of this century may be gleaned from Papal Bulls condemning them—some from the guarded comments of contemporary writers, and from the works of Dante. A brief list of certain dogmas denied and counter opinions set stirring by the Joachists will disclose how far-reaching was their revolt against orthodox theology.

1. Hell. Joachim taught that the real Hell was this ill-governed world. The notion of everlasting torment was rejected by the Joachists and spurned by educated lay opinion. Many, in consequence, were accused of denying the immortality of the soul.

2. The doctrine of Original Sin was replaced by that of Original Righteousness. Sin was regarded as no inherent defect in human nature, but the effect of bad example and bad laws. These were 'heresies' of ancient descent.

3. The conception of a God of Wrath, fatally doomed to execute terrible judgments on mankind, both before and after death, was replaced by that of a God, uncircumscribed, Who loves and forgives His erring creatures.

4. Ultimate salvation for all after purgation of a reformatory (not an expiatory) character, was proclaimed as the goal towards which the judgments of God were directed. The doctrine of universal restoration held by John Scotus Erigena was widely disseminated.

5. Righteous Greeks, Romans, Jews and heathen were regarded as eligible for admission to Paradise—even if cut off from the actual Beatific Vision.

6. Forgiveness of sins could not be obtained by virtue of priestly absolution, but by repentance and faith, by forgiveness of injuries received, by meekness and charity.

7. Purgatory was no place of torment or of vengeance for past sin. Its purpose was to purify the will by merciful discipline, inclining the mind to good desires.

8. The purchase of prayers or masses for the living or dead was of no avail; the worship of images and relics useless and ridiculous. Papal Indulgences for sin had no value. There was no 'Treasure of the Church' at the disposition of the Pope.

9. The curse of excommunication produced no ill effect, except in so far as the late repentant were delayed by their previous transgressions in beginning their purgation.

10. The imperative need of the age was for the translation of the Bible—more especially the Gospels—into the common language of the people, and for the use of this language in public and private worship.

11. Baptism was revered as the portal of the faith, but that it was indispensable for salvation was firmly denied.

12. Ordination was less essential for the ministers of Christ than holiness of life.

13. Simony or proffering money for preferment as Abbot, Bishop or Pope completely annulled the appointment to the office. Simoniacal Popes were not Popes, but usurpers.

14. Ultimately the entire Papal hierarchy would be superseded in favour of ministers, perhaps monks, who by their true dedication to Holy Poverty would be free from avarice and ambition.

15. The Unction of the Holy Spirit freely bestowed on all who sought it in sincerity of heart would rescue the world from warfare, sin and suffering.

#### DIVERSE THEORIES OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST

When Joachim de Flore gave utterance to the famous prophecy, accepted by Dante as divinely inspired, that the Age of the Son was doomed shortly to pass, together with the whole Catholic hierarchy, he must have been well aware that he was foretelling the withdrawal of the Sacraments prior to the opening of the Third Age.

Early in the Middle Ages differences of interpretation in regard to the Holy Elements had begun to appear. The wise restraint with which the early Fathers of the Church had written of the Holy Mystery as figurative and spiritual was abandoned by some who found in it an enticing opportunity for subtlety of thought and expression. Orthodox authority leaned strongly towards a literal acceptance of the words of Christ, and theologians striving after precise definitions displayed a dangerous trend towards belief in a miraculous physical change in the elements.

The efforts made from time to time to combat materialistic beliefs were continually defeated. As, for instance, Bérenger, who had taught that Christ cannot be corporeally

present in the sacrament, but spiritually, was forced to recant by the Pope in 1051, and to assert that 'the true body and blood are not only a sacrament, but are in truth touched and broken by the hands of the priest and pressed by the teeth of the faithful'.

The decree of the Lateran Council of 1215 was expressed in more metaphysical language:

'The body and blood of Jesus Christ are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the species of bread and wine, the bread and wine respectively being transubstantiated into body and blood of divine power, so that in order to the perfecting of the mystery of unity we may ourselves receive from his (body) what he himself receives from ours.'

But popular superstition was not content with guarded expressions. Marvellous stories were told about the Host, and, being received as duly authenticated miracles, rendered a rich harvest to Church or monastery. One of the most sensational has wide historic importance, for it is said to have prompted Urban IV to make obligatory on the whole Church observance of the Feast of Corpus Christi: 'A priest saying Mass at the Church of Santa Catarina at Bologna was troubled after the consecration with doubts about the truth of transubstantiation. He then perceived the Host beginning to bleed, and saw that the blood soaked through the corporal into the marble of the Altar.' Officially accepted as authentic, the miraculous occurrence attracted crowds of worshippers, and none could with safety throw doubt upon it.

Thomas Aquinas, then at the height of his fame, was commissioned by Pope Urban IV to compose offices for the newly instituted Feast of Corpus Christi. The offices which he composed bear witness to his deep reverence for Evangelic truth. They are entirely founded on Holy Scripture, and form an admirable compendium of Bible types and teaching about the holy mystery. But he was not content with this. He enriched the Office with several notable hymns, and was able by this means to formulate a pure Eucharistic doctrine unblemished by popular misconceptions. In his great hymn, *Lauda Sion*, he seems to take special pains to eradicate from men's minds the notion that a crumb fallen from the paten, or a drop of consecrated wine from the chalice could materialise as human flesh or drops of blood.



The metaphysical doctrine of transubstantiation thus presented by St. Thomas and accepted by devout mystics afforded no foundation for the supposition latent in the acceptance of the Corpus Christi incident and many others like it. To deny the authenticity of such marvels, however, might supply incontestable proof of heresy. The Inquisition authorities strongly leaned to the literal aspect of the Rite, and thus spiritual values tended more and more to become suspect. By the end of the century indeed spiritual began to be applied as a word of reproach to the mystics of the Dominican and Franciscan Orders. The materialistic view of transubstantiation had triumphed over the metaphysical. Of this there are unmistakable signs in the encouragement officially bestowed on miraculous stories based on the physical transformation of the elements.

The dominant thought in the reception of the Holy Eucharist is the mystic but real Presence of Christ, who has given Himself to be the life and food of the soul. Herein lies that devotion to Christ which throughout the ages has illumined the Church. In this the mystic, and the humblest most unlearned soul alike, might hail the author of his salvation and taste the joy of His in-dwelling love.

The hymn of St. Thomas most in keeping with the spirit of devotion which shines through the *New Life* was never incorporated in the public services of the Church, though it was early added to various missals for private devotion—'Adoro te devote, latens Deitas'. The last stanza in particular seems to suggest the attitude of Dante towards the Miracle in which lay his Beatitude:

O Christ, Whom now beneath a veil we see,  
May what we thirst for soon our portion be,  
To gaze on Thee unveiled, and see Thy Face,  
The Vision of Thy Glory and Thy Grace.

It should be noted that reception of the Holy Eucharist was obligatory once a year only, at or near Easter. Confession to a priest for the purpose of obtaining absolution was made a necessary preliminary in 1215, and thus a serious impediment was placed in the way of frequent Communion. Except in some monastic institutions and on special occasions Communion was a rare privilege.

To turn from the ecstatic motions of the believer in communion with his Saviour to the indifference of the crowd

compulsorily attending Mass every Sunday and holy day is to come at once to grips with the great religious problem of the age.

The attitude of the populace towards the Rite, on which they had been led to believe that their ultimate rescue from eternal fire depended, was very curious. The modern reader is amazed at the things which went on in churches during the celebration of Mass, the comings and goings, the gossip and quarrelling, the secular business transacted, the noise and general indifference. But it must be realised that during the office of the Mass the priests performed their part in complete isolation from the people, usually far off behind massive gates, and their proceedings were only marked by the tinkle of bells, which proclaimed successive stages in the ceremony until its consummation in the act of consecration. That the words of the priest had power to summon the corporeal presence of the Son of God was the great fact which penetrated to the congregation, and by constant familiarity it would appear that this stupendous miracle made very little impression on the worshippers. Through lack of instruction their slow minds, engrossed in personal fears and interests, failed to grasp the significance of what was enacted in the dim recesses of the sanctuary. Few of them were capable of forming any idea of Sacramental grace or the call to newness of life.

Impenetrable secrecy surrounded the Canon of the Mass. Fear of profanation, no doubt, dictated this course, but it had the effect of creating a magic aspect of the ceremony in the minds of the people. What the priests said or did in the sanctuary was unknown. Whether they were saintly and devout or evil-minded and profane made no difference. Provided that the proper materials were used, the proper words said, the proper gestures made, Christ would appear and the sacrifice be accomplished. No effort of devotion on the part of priest or people seemed to them to be vitally necessary. A mechanical celebration, a mechanical response, appeared to suffice.

The august and mystical passages of the Office, designed to prepare the mind of the worshipper for spiritual participation in the Eucharistic Feast were altogether concealed from him in words which were never written down, and were spoken inaudibly, in a language he did not understand. The ignorant laity were dependent for help in forming pure

## CHAPTER III

### INITIATION INTO THE NEW LIFE

LOOKING BACK over the days of his childhood, Dante scrutinised his early recollections until he discovered a point near the end of his ninth year, from which he had first started out to lead the *NEW LIFE*.<sup>1</sup> It is a significant fact that the age indicated synchronised with that solemn epoch in the child's life at which the Rite of Confirmation, followed shortly after by First Communion, was usually administered. Under a faithful priest every effort was made by long preparation and frequent instruction, by prayer and fasting, to attune the minds of the children about to receive the Holy Mysteries to a lofty atmosphere, charged with emotion and new aspirations. The boys and girls who made their First Communion on the same occasion would be naturally brought into close contact, and it is not remarkable that one lovely child came to hold the central place in Dante's recollections of the ceremony, until in a mystic sense she became for him the personification of the new revelation of God and of his own soul vouchsafed him in that hour. Of her it may already have been whispered that she was destined to be the Bride of Christ, dedicated by her parents to the cloister from early childhood. If this were so, the child would be presented from the first moment to Dante's gaze decked with a halo, of unearthly radiance. The effect of his First Communion on a boy like Dante, of abnormal sensitiveness to beauty, and already receptive of abstract ideas, was electric. There resulted a thrill of overpowering excitement, a genuine<sup>2</sup> flash of religious ecstasy; joy seemingly beyond description or power of memory to recall.

At a riper age, when composing the *New Life*, he discriminated three distinct strands in this never-to-be-forgotten experience.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.—2 Cor., v, 17. A.V.

<sup>2</sup> Dante preluded his description with the words '*dico veracemente*' (verily I say), as though what he had to relate might seem incredible.

First his whole being, the spirit of his life, awoke to a new perception of Divine Love, 'Behold a God mightier than I, who is come to master me'. Trembling 'horribly' he was conscious of the Presence of the Christ, the Lord of Love, Who claimed henceforth his entire allegiance.

The next impression was of a new faculty stirring within him, able to impart a consciousness of the Divine Presence. In the mystic system great importance attached to the distinction between Reason and Intellect, or the faculty of Intuition. Reason was 'exterior', subject to error, confined to natural science. Intuition was 'interior', spiritual, free from error, the passport to heavenly joy. Preparation for First Communion would probably include instruction about this higher faculty, latent in all; its exercise was essential to the right discerning of the Lord's Body. Instantaneously, in the act of adoration, the youthful Dante became aware that he was receiving a quasi-miraculous vision of Truth in which ordinary faculties and sense perception had no part. 'The animal spirit, which dwells in the lofty chamber (of the brain) into which all the sensitive spirits carry their perceptions, began to marvel.' The spirit of sight (precursor of faith) proclaimed the awakening of the new faculty:

'Now hath appeared your Beatitude'. This mystic sense is the Seed of Divinity whereby man is able to gain contact with his Maker; in the development of this Divine strand, as Dante had learned from Aristotle and as he afterwards demonstrated in the *Banquet*, lies true happiness.

Thus we may apprehend that, in the hour of his First Communion, the glorious Lady of his Mind appeared to him in a double sense, objectively under the form of the Blessed Sacrament, subjectively in the first conscious stirring in his mind of the mystic faculty which gives access to the Divine. Objective and subjective are not distinguished in a child's mind, however clearly they be differentiated in the reasoning of the Divinity student. The exquisite thrill of emotion was repeated whenever he attended the Holy Eucharist. In this lay his Beatitude, and to this, moved by Love, he often resorted. Here he might watch the devotions of the maiden who had become for him in symbol and reality his true Beatitude. To her and to the ecstatic form of devotion, in which she too participated, he could apply the words of Homer: 'She seemed not the daughter of a mortal man, but of God'.

There is no room for wonder that the third impression Dante carried away from his First Communion was the lament of his 'natural' spirit 'which dwells in that part where our nourishment is distributed'. 'Alack, wretched am I, for from henceforth I shall be constantly kept in check.' Childish self-indulgence and follies brought into direct conflict with the higher nature must go to the wall. From now on Love, the Love of Christ, ruled his heart, reigning there by virtue of a high-wrought imagination in which the noble maiden and the Sacred Rite were inextricably mingled. There seems to be a hint that the mystic sense once manifested continued for a time to grow in power, and that at Mass ecstatic visions, restrained within due bounds by Reason, or as we should say by common sense, were no infrequent experiences.

Out of these early impressions, partly dreams, and partly actual occurrences, Dante seems to have woven the figure of Beatrice, embodying both the living maiden and the Miracle of the Mass, apprehended through the mystic sense of Intuition. Thus as it were naturally and from childhood the glorious Lady of his Mind abode with him.

There is an actuality about the *New Life* which forbids the supposition that it was pure invention—'made up,' as one might say. These things of which he wrote, some of them so slight as to seem hardly worth narrating, stand out, unless specifically declared visions, as real happenings to real people, on which his mind worked, delving after their true significance. Beatrice in particular was a real child, a real woman. He was completely cut off by fate from any hope of being united to her. She was, we conjecture, the destined Bride of Christ and, when the moment came, she took the veil. Thereafter she died.

The theory we have ventured to advance fully accounts for the ethereal nature of the devotion she excited, no less than for the close secrecy in which he shrouded the person of his love.

He pursued the same strain of secrecy in the book which he subsequently wrote avowedly to unveil the hidden theme of the *New Life*. As an explanation of the symbolic figure of Beatrice the *Banquet* leaves much to be desired. The reader searches in vain for any direct mention of the allegorical and true meaning attached to this Being. He learns that she is Miraculous and Divine, but those attributes had already

been assigned to her in the *New Life*. Her identity remains as enigmatic as before.

Even with the aid of that gentle art of 'disguising', which he commended as most beautiful and profitable, Dante found the identity of Beatrice too dangerous a topic to enlarge upon.

It was far otherwise with her Rival, the celebrated Lady who looked at him out of a Window with compassionate eyes. The greater part of the *Banquet* is devoted to this Lady. She plays a minor part in the *New Life*. In the *Banquet* she is supreme.

Nevertheless the truth about Beatrice lies not irretrievably hidden. Dante desired most vehemently that it should be revealed to the people who were on the watch for it. And he appears to have intended his disciples to deduce the true significance of his first Love from the statements he was making about the Second Lady. So closely indeed were these gracious Beings linked in essence that when having adorned and disguised his theme in subtle fashion he did actually avow what New Intelligence of Love possessed his heart after the Passing of Beatrice, he left no room for doubt as to the symbolic meaning which he assigned to the holy miracle—Beatrice.

It is not a little disconcerting, however, to be told at the outset of the third book of the *Banquet* that the Lady at the Window stands for Philosophy.<sup>1</sup> The statement has deterred many, probably was intended to deter the hostile, from pursuing the enquiry further. It seems to reduce Dante's gravely precluded announcement of the mystery into a bald explanation that after the death of his first love he found comfort in reading philosophic treatises—a fact which it must be admitted throws very little light on the perplexities presented by the *New Life*.

Yet, as the theme undergoes development, one new feature after another is supplied, until, step by step, the reader is guided through a wide range of definitions into the presence of the Third Person of the Trinity. Philosophy is a living exercise of Wisdom,<sup>2</sup> and Dante uses every device of poetry and rhetoric to demonstrate the Reality which underlies

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, 16. You are to know that this Lady stands for Philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. III, 12. Cf. also Bk. III, 14. Philosophy has for her subject-matter Wisdom, and for her form Love, and for the combination of the one and the other the exercise of Speculation.

this ambiguous word. WISDOM is the distinctive attribute of the HOLY GHOST, nay WISDOM and the HOLY GHOST are ONE.<sup>1</sup> In its highest sense Wisdom is no longer a purely abstract attribute, but the name of the Holy Spirit, Who is the source and goal of Wisdom. It is only in a secondary sense that the word Wisdom can be applied to the sciences sometimes thus described. Of Whom, indeed, but of the Third Person of the Trinity may it be said that He exists supremely in and *proceedeth from the Father*, ordained from everlasting, Brightness of the Eternal Light, spotless Mirror of the Majesty of God? <sup>2</sup> All happiness, all goodness flows down from Him, Who existed in the Divine Thought when God created the universe, and thus was partaker in its creation.<sup>3</sup> Boldly drawing a close parallel between the Son of God and this Divine Being, Dante declares the Lady of whom he was enamoured to be no mere abstraction, but the 'most fair and noble Daughter of the Emperor of the Universe',<sup>4</sup> and again, 'the Spouse, the Sister, the most beloved *Daughter* of the Emperor of Heaven'.<sup>5</sup>

The 'loving exercise' of WISDOM is thus proclaimed as the approach of the soul to the Holy Spirit of God, the Witness of the Holy Spirit in the soul of man. The Influence or Unction bestowed by the Holy Ghost is specifically defined and personified at the end of the *Banquet*<sup>6</sup> under the name of 'Nobility', and much that has previously been predicated of Wisdom is assigned also to NOBILITY. It is revealed as the origin of all virtues, the Seed of Blessedness vouchsafed by God to the soul, an excellence which descends upon man from a supreme and spiritual Virtue. 'Speaking scientifically' (or according to Reason) Nobility is a celestial Virtue which draws the soul from the potentiality of the mind into life; it is 'the possible intellectual virtue'. 'But from the theological' (or Spiritual) standpoint, we are to apprehend that Nobility is a Divine Force or Influence which proceeds from the Holy Ghost.<sup>7</sup> Here, then, is the core of the whole matter. All these gifts spring from ineffable Love, and the

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. III, 12. She is in Him in perfect and true fashion as though in eternal wedlock.

<sup>2</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. III, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. III, 15. She existed in the Divine Thought, which is Intellect itself, when He made the universe, whence it follows that she made it.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. II, 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. III, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. IV, 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. IV, 21.

Divine Love is appropriated to the HOLY SPIRIT. The Third Person of the Trinity is here at last mentioned by name in the treatise wholly occupied with His attributes and effects.

All that went before in prose and verse leads unswervingly to the demonstration that it was in the Outpouring or Unction of the Holy Ghost that Dante after the passing of Beatrice from earth found peace and the supreme joy of Beatitude.

In the eyes of a modern reader such a climax results in bewilderment. The kernel of the closely guarded secret is then a central tenet of the Christian Faith, always, everywhere and by everyone believed ; the mystery to be revealed is the indwelling Power of the Holy Spirit. Under what conceivable conditions, it must be asked, can it have been found necessary to disguise from all but the initiate the knowledge that it was in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost that Dante found his highest consolations ? The answer is to be sought in the history of the terrible religious perplexities and persecutions of the thirteenth century. The outline already supplied of the conditions under which the *New Life* and the *Banquet* were produced exposes in some degree the courage required to set forth even thus cryptically the Eternal Gospel of the Holy Spirit. The ardent reasoning of the *Banquet* did in effect manifest the author's conviction that the Third Age of the Spirit had already begun, and for proclaiming this doctrine, not deliberately as Dante dared to do, adorning it with flower of genius in prose and verse, but in strictest privacy, men were at this time being savagely scourged, immured in foul dungeons, starved, burnt alive.

But if the Lady at the Window signify the indwelling Power of the Holy Spirit, envisaged at first 'in a glass darkly', what conception, deemed worthy to precede the Divine revelation of the Spirit, can be shrouded under the figure of Beatrice ?

When he set himself to hymn the Glory of the Holy Spirit revealed to 'noble souls' as the 'New Intelligence of Love', Dante proclaimed by this very utterance the identity of the Blessed One to whom from early childhood his allegiance had been given, whose inevitable passing he had long foreknown, whose final removal from earth plunged him into gloom and despair. In philosophic diction the Three Persons of the Trinity are in a category beyond and above all else. To precede the Spirit can be predicated of none



but of the Father and the Son. The Unction (Nobility) through which the Spirit is manifested on earth to souls prepared by faith to receive this gift can be paralleled only by the Mystery of the Blessed Sacrament through which on earth the Son communicates Himself to the faithful. When in the *Banquet* Dante announced that the Third Age of the Spirit had begun, it was but the continuation of his announcement in the *New Life* that the Holy Eucharist, visible mark on earth of the Second Age of the Son, had ceased to operate, had in fact been withdrawn for ever from a world no longer worthy to behold so stupendous a Miracle.

No complete change of allegiance was involved in this transition. It was in reality a normal development of the soul such as many Christian people experience, but it was terribly complicated by the dark and passionate forces which brooded over the religious scene. Half consciously the mystic becomes gradually detached from forms and ceremonies, even when endeared to him by long usage, until highly spiritualised perceptions of Divine truth begin to make themselves felt. The soul shifts its balance, as it were, from reliance on outer and visible marks of religious observance and learns to await in silence, in the act of contemplation, hidden intuitions of Divine Love. The Catholic Church has ever honoured her sons and daughters to whom the Holy Spirit has revealed the inner mysteries of Divine Love. It was the most cruel feature in the religious persecution of this age that the fellowship of the Holy Spirit was prohibited from mention, and had become a doctrine which Dante could not declare save in secrecy and under cover of allegory. During these years of misrule in the Church it was accounted an infamous heresy to believe that the promises of spiritual enlightenment vouchsafed by Christ and continually renewed by His Apostles in their epistles could be appropriated by individual Christians. According to the pronouncement of John XXII in his Bull from Avignon, 1316, the promise of the Holy Spirit was to the Apostles and through them to the rulers of the Church. 'To declare the promise of the Lord concerning the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled not in the Apostles but in themselves' he declared to be the pernicious error of the Spirituals whom he hereby denounced and delivered to destruction in all parts of the world.

Belief in these promises and faith in their fulfilment did indeed encourage men to place their hopes of salvation in

the Love of the Father manifested through the Spirit rather than in ceremonies which through the avarice of those who ruled the Church and the unworthiness of the priesthood had lost vitality.

There is ground then for the theory that the secret which Dante most guardedly imparted to initiates in the *New Life* was the long-anticipated close of the Second Age, the dawn of that Third Age in which the choicest promises of the Gospels were to find fulfilment.

With all its radiant outlook on the future, its hopes of human perfectibility, and the joys it offered in contemplative devotion, the new Gospel was ushered in amid doubts, terror and acute sense of loss. Critically examined, with its historical background kept in view, the *New Life* presents a picture of the intense mental stress which attended men's recognition of the dawning Third Age. It is a picture unique in the history of religious experience, by reason of the tenacious loyalty it exhibits towards former devotional ideals. Never did Dante go back upon the exquisite assurance of Divine Love which had visited him from a child onwards in the Holy Eucharist. When this satisfaction failed him he took full blame for the deprivation. When the conviction was at length forced upon him that the Miracle no longer took place, he mourned as for the death of his early love. When at length after harassing doubts and much distress of mind he came to a perception that the indwelling Power of the Holy Spirit was ordained to supersede the visible Rite as the Pledge of God's Presence among men, he still worshipped the Blessed Miracle now transferred to Heaven. And in his *Paradiso* he blended in one conception the double manifestation of Divine Grace, and expounded through the lips of the risen Beatrice the wondrous mysteries of the Eternal Gospel of the Spirit.

In the transcendently beautiful scene which pictures his reunion with Beatrice in the earthly Paradise, Dante openly made it known that when first she appeared to him she was 'Veiled beneath the Angelic Feast'.<sup>1</sup> It was hardly possible to intimate more clearly her identity with the Mystic Element in the Eucharist. Beatrice at once reminded him that when she first showed herself to him she was 'on the threshold of her Second Age', on the point of 'rising from Flesh

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.*, xxx, 64. I saw the Lady, she who first appeared to me veiled beneath the Angelic Feast, direct her eyes towards me over the stream.

to Spirit', in order that thereby she might increase 'in Beauty and Power'.<sup>1</sup> It was his ultimate conviction that the Divine Faculty whereby God communicates Himself to man on earth, triple in operation, is in effect but One, transmitted during the First Age of the Father through the gift of prophecy; during the Second Age of the Son through the Holy Eucharist, and during the Third Age of the Spirit through the Unction of the Holy Spirit manifested to the pure in heart. Thus seeing face to face and no longer through a glass darkly he could identify the Blest One of his early aspirations with the Spirit of Truth whose praises he hymned in the *Banquet*.

To regard the *New Life* as a spiritual instead of as a sensuous document is to discover a remarkable correspondence between its main theme and the message of Joachim, as transmitted to the thirteenth century.

It has been shown that in foretelling the approaching transformation of the Church from the Age of the Son to the Age of the Spirit, Joachim impressed on the minds of his followers that two vital alterations in their faith and practice were to be anticipated:—first, the withdrawal of the Sacramental system, and next the outpouring of the Holy Spirit not alone on the rulers of the Church, but on all the pure in heart.

For those who had the wit to comprehend the significance of the first prophecy it meant a virtual revolution in the religious life of the Church, so completely had the Mass become the core and central fact of Christianity. That the prophet should have dared to foreshadow the passing from the Church of her great rite and pledge of salvation, and that many of the most loyal Catholics of the succeeding age should have seemed to acquiesce in this expectation, testifies to the existence of an overwhelming recoil from abuses which had long profaned the holy mystery. These things could not be put into words either by Joachim or his followers. They demanded the utmost secrecy and silence. But the suppression of the priesthood and the consequent loss of the sacramental system involved unquestionably the loss of the great miracle by which the life of the Church had hitherto been sustained. And thus the message of the prophet under one aspect was fraught with impending woe.

Among all the men of the thirteenth century who had

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.*, xxx, 128.

reacted to Joachist ideas none was better fitted than Dante to explore to the utmost what the loss of the Holy Eucharist meant to the devout and imaginative soul, and, in a wider sense, to Christendom at large.

We believe the true theme of Dante's *New Life* to be the approaching withdrawal of the Presence of Christ from the Sacrament of His Body and Blood. From the outset can be traced his foreboding that the Figure whose divine attributes are stressed with passionate ardour is doomed to pass from mortal ken, and we are brought to a perception that there lies hidden under the symbol of the Beatrice so reverently adored an image of the Holy Eucharist, distinctive mystery and glory of the Age of the Son, too pure to be suffered to remain in a world unworthy of the Sacred Presence.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CERTAIN KEY-WORDS

WHEN THE *Banquet* is taken seriously as a genuine attempt to unfold the mysteries of the *New Life*, it will be found that Dante devoted a great deal of care to a definition of the meaning he assigned to certain words. He made no concealment of the fact that these words were employed of set purpose in a sense differing from what they usually hold. If an effort be made to follow out these hints to their logical conclusion, a surprising change begins to take place in the narrative.

#### THE LADIES OF THE NEW LIFE

Of all the expressions interpreted by Dante to aid his readers the most remarkable is the word LADIES. His assertion that he used the word LADIES,<sup>1</sup> not in the common sense, but to denote persons of intellectual ability, introduces an entirely new note into the story.

Too much has been heard of an artificial Florence in which it was possible for young ladies to walk together in the streets, while young men who adored them watched and waited on the chance of receiving a greeting. With a more intimate knowledge of medieval life, such for instance as d'Annunzio has portrayed it in his *Paolo and Francesca*, and Dr. Davidsohn in his monumental *History of Florence*,<sup>2</sup> the stage Florence disappears. The City of Flowers was in truth in the thirteenth century no place for sentimental dalliance. The age had little respect for women, and outside the closely guarded precincts of their home none were safe from outrage. The wives and mothers of the most noble princes

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. III, 14. By gentle Lady (*donna gentil*) is meant the soul noble in intellect and free in the use of its own proper power, which is reason.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Davidsohn, *Geschichte von Florenz*. Vierter Band. (Berlin, 1927.)

had been the prizes of the highest bidder. Daughters were at the absolute disposal of their legal guardians. To offer the tribute of open admiration to an unmarried maiden was to arouse suspicion of her virtue, an insult only to be wiped out with blood.

Dante was well aware that his behaviour as suggested in the *New Life* taken literally set him in an unseemly light. His dread lest it should bring him into infamy was plainly sincere. Taking the opening chapters of his narrative at their surface value as a story of his youthful *amours*, we find that in order to disguise his love for Beatrice, usually assumed to be a lady affianced and shortly to be married to another, he pretended to adore a second lady to whom he addressed songs expressly meant to encourage her and others in the belief of his devotion to her. This second Lady having left the city, he selected a third Lady to hold the same invidious office, and behaved in such a manner towards her that his good name came to be 'viciously defamed' in popular esteem. Beatrice hearing of his conduct was so deeply incensed against him as to pass him by without vouchsafing her usual greeting.

He endeavoured to appease Beatrice by protesting that in spite of these transparent infidelities he had never loved any but herself. Yet we leave him finally, only a short time after the death of Beatrice, in the act of surrendering his heart to Lady No. 4, the Lady at the Window.

It would seem that in relating such things about himself Dante was too much absorbed in the task of concealing his mystic meaning from suspicious authorities to realise the obvious construction which people in general would put upon this curious series of intrigues with 'noble ladies'. In order to unravel it the veil of femininity must first be stripped off. It hides not only the identity of the noble souls with whom he was wont to consort, but also those religious and abstract conceptions with which his mind was occupied.

Both in Latin and Italian, such abstract ideas as *Ecclesia*, *Eucharistia*, *Sapientia*, *Filosofia*, *Nobiltà*, being of feminine gender, demand the use of feminine pronouns and relatives. As a natural consequence they are frequently personified as female, as, for instance, the Church as the Bride of Christ, and Philosophy as a fair woman, in that book of the *Consolations of Boethius* which Dante mentioned that he was reading at this time. Boethius made his Lady unmistakably

allegorical. But Guido Guinicelli, Guido Cavalcanti, and many other poets of the New Style, used the language of adoration towards certain Ladies very freely and vivaciously without obvious marks of allegory, and made of it a specious veil under which to disguise their speculations on religious truths. Ardent intellects found it irresistibly enticing to brave the prohibitions of Rome and outwit the spies of the Inquisition Courts by publishing under form of lyrics their notions about forbidden topics. How they did it we learn from the *Banquet*. The lovers' sighs were their doubts,<sup>1</sup> and there was much to arouse them in the dogmatism of a singularly ignorant priesthood and a Papal Curia bent mainly on increasing its temporal dominion.

The 'Ladies' who enthralled their hearts were not only intellectuals. They stood also for abstract influences or sources of truth, some in harmony with the Roman doctrine, others opposed to it. Truth found its way by clear demonstrations, figured as flashes from the eyes, to the intellect.<sup>2</sup> The smiles of overpowering sweetness but rarely vouchsafed were the persuasive witness within the lover's mind to the Presence of God, accounted in every form of religion the fruition of the highest good, man's Beatitude. The beauties tenderly referred to, joyously counted over, were of no mortal pattern. They were beauties of a spiritual essence. Technically, in philosophic diction, they may have a dull sound as 'moral virtues', but Dante will show later on that these virtues are the offshoots which testify to man's nobility; they are the fruits of the Spirit, and are to be cherished as the adornments of the noble soul in every stage of 'her' development. For the word soul (*anima*) is female also, and Dante discriminates curiously between the soul

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, 16. Where it says 'If he fear not the anguish of sighing' there must be understood if he fear not the toil of study, and the strife of perplexities which rise in manifold fashion from the beginning of the glances of this Lady.

<sup>2</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. III, 15. The eyes of Wisdom are her demonstrations whereby the truth is seen most certainly, and her smile is her persuasions whereby the inner light of wisdom is revealed behind a certain veil; and in these two is felt the loftiest joy of Blessedness, which in Paradise is the supreme Good. This pleasure may not be (found) in aught else here below save in looking upon these eyes and this smile.

Cf. Eckhart, *Sermon xxxii*. The mouth of the soul is the highest part of the soul, and she has this in mind when she says, 'He hath put His Word into my mouth', this being the kiss of the soul; mouth to mouth the Father conveys the Son into the soul.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CERTAIN KEY-WORDS

'noble in intellect, free in the exercise of her own proper power which is reason', and the other kind of souls which 'exist not by their own (reason) but by that of another'. Souls who exercise their own reason he called 'Ladies', or 'noble ladies'. They were such as had broken free from the yoke of the Church, which in practice if not precisely in theory forbade the exercise of Reason in matters appropriated to its own sphere. Handmaids (*ancille*) were such as surrendered their intellects without reserve to the bidding of the priests. The name was not a term of reproach but of limitation. They were often holy but they were not free. Their vision was circumscribed. Their inner peace was at the mercy of those they served, who might and often did lead them astray.

Noble Ladies then were either manifestations of the Divine or recipients of such manifestations. Foremost among the Divine perceptions which visited the intellect of Dante stood Beatrice, alluded to as 'Nine' because Nine is the symbol of the Triune Deity—Beatrice, the Eucharistic Miracle, making manifest on earth the image of the Son of God. At a later stage he established contact with the Lady who showed herself through a window, as it were darkly in an enigma—image of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity through Whom mystic union with God was to be vouchsafed in the act of speculation. Inspired by the Holy Spirit mortals themselves partake of the Divine. They too become 'noble' and help to ennoble others. Born of the Spirit they are the Sons of God.

Viewed in this light the fair ladies who surrounded Dante lose the false glamour of earthly passion. They are revealed as the monks, preachers, students who were searching in this new and wonderfully inspired age into the mysteries of the faith. The love-songs of the New Style poets are revealed as hymns. It was to such noble souls that Dante addressed the Ode, 'Ye who awake men's love by eloquence, Through inspiration of the Holy Ghost';<sup>1</sup> and again, 'Ye noble souls that are inspired by Love'.<sup>2</sup>

The writers and preachers of the Spiritual movement,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Voi che intendendo lo terzo ciel movete.*

<sup>2</sup> *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore.*

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Eckhart, *Sermon xxxvii*. Let those in quest of God be careful lest appearances deceive them in these people who are peculiar and hard to place.



pioneers of the Gospel of Divine Love, were not only conspicuous figures such as Gerard de Donnino and Petrus Johannis d'Olivii; there was a company of their disciples, moving about the country in secret, disguised in various ways, delivering their message. They made part of a vast organisation opposed to the 'Carnal Church'. They permeated France, Italy, Germany, the Low Countries and other parts of Europe. Wandering chiefly in wild and sparsely inhabited regions they seldom visited the towns except by night, when they revealed themselves with infinite precaution to converts or initiates. They bore even among their enemies a high reputation for holiness and eloquence. Through the crafty counter organisation of false converts and spies kept ceaselessly at work by the Inquisition they were exposed to continual danger of betrayal. They had many thousands of disciples. These were the men of intellect whose identity was hidden under the common title of 'Ladies', noble in intellect and free in the use of their own proper power which is Reason.

## THE THIRD HEAVEN

'In every branch of knowledge Scripture is a Star, full charged with light which showeth forth that knowledge.'

In writing the *New Life* and the *Banquet* Dante could quote none but pre-Christian authors lest he should betray that he was writing a religious treatise. He could not quote so much as a text in the vernacular, for all translation of the Scriptures was prohibited. He laid stress on the extent to which he was influenced by Boethius and Cicero,<sup>1</sup> the one a heathen, the other a doubtful convert to Christianity. But the further course of his studies he hid in silence. There is

No one rightly knows them but those in whom the same light shines—viz. the light of truth. Yet it may well be that wayfarers to that same good, but who have not yet reached it, will come across these perfected ones, of whom we have been speaking. I warn you, you must keep a sharp lookout, for they are difficult to tell—the things they say and do seem unaccountable, for what God makes obvious to persons on the way to their eternal happiness is foreign to those that have arrived there. These people you must know do most valuable work. They work within, you understand, in the man of the soul.—May we recognise these people and, loving God in them, with them possess the city they have won.

<sup>1</sup> Bk. II, c. 16.

scarcely an allusion to the Bible<sup>1</sup> or to the Fathers of the Church, or to such orthodox modern divines as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventura. Yet studies pursued in 'the schools of the religious orders' must have confined him almost exclusively to such reading. Few classical authors indeed were admitted to the monasteries, where pre-Christian writers at this time were often denounced as devilish. By cautious omissions and guarded hints he contrived to throw over his search for wisdom an air of abstraction, as though philosophy were a matter in which he took merely such a detached interest as a man may take in the subject he reads for his degree. Yet he let it be understood in more than one place that all this time he was suffering agonies of doubt, and was leaving no stone unturned in an impassioned effort to reconcile revealed religion with the truths exposed by Aristotle, to which his reason assented. It is necessary to hold fast to the basic fact declared in the *Banquet* that 'Philosophy is the most fair and noble daughter of the Emperor of the Universe'.<sup>2</sup> 'And the Emperor of the Universe is Christ, Son of the Sovran God, and Son of the Virgin Mary.' 'He was the Light which lightens us in the darkness.'

These definite statements, accepted at their normal value, suffice to lift the entire subject out of the realm of heathen philosophy. Not the Wisdom which shines dubiously through the speculations of the ancients, but the illumination of Christian mystics, through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, proves to be the theme of the Second Book of the *Banquet*.

The method of 'disguising' through which Dante made this ultimately clear to his inner band of disciples is one very familiar to all whose business it has been to exercise censorship of suspicious documents. It consists in sliding the real matter to be disclosed in among a series of unimportant statements, lightly connected with it.

The opening line of the Ode he set out to expound in this Book is usually rendered literally—'Ye who by understand-

<sup>1</sup> The exception to total silence about the New Testament is to be found in Bk. III, c. 14. 'In the beginning of the Gospel of John her eternity may be clearly noted.' The passage he referred to is of course not actually quoted.

<sup>2</sup> Bk. II, c. 16. The Lady of whom I was enamoured after my first Love was the most fair and noble Daughter of the Emperor of the Universe, to whom Pythagoras gave the name of Philosophy.

ing move the Third Heaven'.<sup>1</sup> The words are not a little obscure, but it would certainly not occur to anyone that they were dangerous or subversive. Yet in the course of his disquisition on this subject he discloses that under cover of this invocation he is appealing to the writers, preachers and teachers who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit are proclaiming among men the spiritual Gospel of Divine Love.

This daring statement is so plainly made that it can hardly be said to be hidden. But it lies embedded in nine discursive chapters dealing with the medieval theory of the nine heavenly spheres, together with a comparison of these spheres to the nine sciences of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*. Only bit by bit are the vital points relating to the Third Heaven, which it is the aim of these chapters to impart, allowed to come to light. In order to satisfy himself as to the meaning of the Third Heaven, the reader may pass over for a moment without scruple all the curious lore which has been brought together to illustrate (and disguise) the true theme. Only so does the truth emerge.

If attention be concentrated on those special features of the Third Heaven and of its 'Movers,' the cause which induced Dante to give it such great prominence at the outset of the Ode begins to emerge. It is certainly an uncommon and therefore a significant thing for a poet to introduce of set purpose into the first line of his poem a phrase which requires for its elucidation many lengthy and complicated chapters.

He divided his explanation of the Third Heaven into two parts, separated from each other by many irrelevant chapters, a plan which suggests that it was his express intention to lead unwary readers to miss the significance of the two parts when placed in close juxtaposition. The gist of the first part (*Banquet*, Bk. II, 2-7) is the intimation that the Third Heaven, named after the Star of Venus which it contains, is a symbol for 'the supreme and most burning love of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>2</sup> In this sphere we are to conceive that a body of Angels known as 'Thrones' adore in ceaseless contemplation the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, 'without respect to aught but Himself', and their movements consist in setting His Love stirring among mankind. These angels of spiritual Love work 'in accord with their nature', that

<sup>1</sup> *Voi che intendete lo terzo ciel movere.*

<sup>2</sup> Bk. II, c. 6. This is a very important chapter, defining the doctrine of the Spirituals in its purest form.

is, they love and make others to love the Holy Spirit. Their special task is to diffuse the Unction of the Holy Spirit upon such noble souls here below as open their hearts to love. This they do by the act of understanding only, or in other words by intuition or contemplation of the Holy Spirit.

Not till he reaches the second part of the comment does Dante give any hint that it is not to these angels alone that his Ode is addressed. Then<sup>1</sup> he enters upon the very delicate and dangerous task of informing the world that they who 'move' the Third Heaven here below are writers, teachers and preachers who carry on the celestial task of the 'Thrones', inspiring with the Love of the Holy Spirit all who are athirst for Wisdom.

The method is simple and effectually disguises the true aim. Successive statements, separated each from each by extraneous matter, bring to light first,<sup>2</sup> that each of the nine Heavens is to be taken for a special branch of knowledge; secondly,<sup>3</sup> that the Third Heaven, that of Venus, stands for Rhetoric, or rather for the art of speaking and writing. Here by an ingenious comparison he intimates that the 'movers' of the Third Heaven whom he is now addressing are not merely writers long dead to be studied only in their books, but are living speakers and preachers. For rhetoric, like the star of Venus which is visible now at morn and now at even, has two modes of making itself apparent; sometimes it is *spoken* before the face of the hearer which answers to the morning star, and sometimes it is *written* as at even from the distant view. Setting aside a bewildering wealth of allegorising about other kinds of knowledge and other Heavens, all of which is more or less irrelevant, we arrive in the last chapter of the comment at the core of the argument. In this it is confided to us that it was the writers and speakers who move the Third Heaven who set Dante on the way of Love. The rays of their Star are writings that conduce to the Love of Wisdom. And we are amazed to find that though much was said earlier about the Third Heaven being dedicated to the Holy Spirit, there is in this place no mention at all of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. For under existing

<sup>1</sup> Bk. II, c. 13. We are to proceed to the allegorical and true exposition.

<sup>2</sup> Bk. II, c. 14. I say that by heaven I mean Knowledge and by the heavens different kinds of knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> Bk. II, c. 14. The heaven of Venus may be compared to rhetoric, 'sweetest of all other kinds of knowledge'.

## THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

circumstances Dante was absolutely debarred from announcing openly to the world that among those who taught him the secret of Wisdom were the 'Spirituals', the mystics, Olivi and his disciples, whose works were indiscriminately banned as heretical in the first years of the fourteenth century.

All this caution is very mystifying and rather wearisome to the modern reader who is unable to conceive why such extraordinary caution should be adopted. But the theme Dante chose, the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, was so obnoxious to authority when treated in the language of the people that an older poet—Ciullo d'Alcamo—is found actually making his heroine invoke 'the Father, the Son and St. Matthew' in order to avoid mention of the Third Person of the Trinity.<sup>1</sup>

## THE PERSONALITY OF LOVE

The entire theme of the *New Life* is Love. On this note it begins and ends. The poems with which it is adorned are songs of Love. In the incidents related Love is the moving spring of action. By virtue of Love Beatrice was able to seize the heart of Dante. Under the influence of Love he gave himself to the new Lady.

Love as personified in the story played an extraordinary part. Early in the action Love began to intervene between Dante and Beatrice and to disturb their perfect understanding, and he is found actually to foment the fluctuations of doubt which set Dante at variance with the Lady of his former allegiance. Albeit Love originally took Dante's heart and gave it to Beatrice to consume, yet later it was Love himself who introduced the rival, 'the Lady at the Window', and inspired praises of her which outdid those composed in honour of Beatrice.

In view of Dante's specific denial, the theory that Love stood for successive phases of earthly passion can be utterly repudiated. What then? It follows that Love, in the *New Life*, is a spiritual and Divine Love recently made manifest (figured therefore as young), pure from every stain (robed in white), impelling Dante with irresistible power to face if need be danger and death itself in order to fulfil its behests.

<sup>1</sup> Gebhardt, *L'Italie Mystique*, page 206. "Vers 1250, en Sicile, on se signe 'au nom du Père, du Fils, et de Saint-Matthieu, afin de ne se compromettre ni avec le Saint-Esprit ni avec l'Evangile de Saint-Jean.'"

Love holds and has always held the central place in the Christian religion. The great outstanding revelation of Jesus Christ was that 'the Father Himself loveth us'. The disciple who best understood His mind reached the perception that God and Love are identical.

Yet most unhappily in the times of which we write the dominant note of Church doctrine had changed from Love to Fear. The Christian virtues of meekness, purity of life and pity fell under suspicion as cloaks of heresy. None might mention the promises of Christ. In whatever direction the Christian looked for consolation in this world or the next he was met by angry denunciations and extortion. Even the crowning act of Divine Love shown forth in the Sacrifice of the Son became linked in the minds of the people with the inappeasable wrath of their Creator. Although comforted in their last hour by the Sacraments they must yet bear to anticipate an appalling cycle of torment unless multitudes of Masses could be said on their behalf for long generations to come—at a price.

In opposition to the threats of the dominant theology the Spirituals relied on the promises which inaugurated the New Age of the Spirit, and thus there was set stirring in men's minds a sense as of an extraordinary rivalry between the religion of the Son and that of the Spirit, between a theology perverted, it seemed, by avarice beyond reform and a new spiritual revelation.

The thoughts about religion of Dante and his friends can be clearly traced in the *New Life*, in the *Banquet* and in many poems of the New Style written with infinite precautions by members of the group and circulated among those who 'understood'. Briefly, the NEW INTELLIGENCE was wholly concerned to reveal that the basis on which God had constructed the universe was not Wrath but Love. A purer conception of the Gospel of Divine Love began to fill the hearts of thousands with a rapture of joy and hope such as but rarely visits mankind. It was as if an intolerable weight had been lifted from their hearts. All was possible in a world irradiated with the smile of its Creator. The New Understanding, identified as it was with a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit, brought with it assurance of the dawning of a new age, in which Popes would no longer have power to foment war nor priests to bind heavy burdens on the people. All the old nightmare of Hell and purgatorial fires was swept away.

Withal devout souls mourned over the inevitable passing of a ritual endeared to them by a thousand associations. Convinced as Olivi's followers were that the Church had reached a pass such that it could not be purified from within and was ordained to be superseded, men were filled with righteous indignation against the rapacious officials who had brought it to this extremity. The spiritually minded were entirely at the mercy of the persecuting party in power. They shrank with horror from being numbered with a despicable tribe of heretics, for the word had been enlarged to include not only unorthodox believers, but criminals, the offscouring of the populace. To risk all for the Gospel of Love, honour and life itself, was a direful step and justified reluctance and dismay. Thus it comes about that in many poems of the New Style terror weighs down the actors. Death broods over the scene. Souls play their part as it were against their own will, braving dangers they dare not name, urged by a force which carries them content and even rapturous through it all. Joy alternates with sorrow. The gloom of an age in which faith had become tarnished and virtue is despised hangs over the action. But all is illumined by spiritual Love and the end is Hope.

The word Love thus becomes polarised. It seems to have stood for that magnetic force which Inquisitors noted in their victims and attributed to the Devil. A magical power of attraction was believed to hang round the person of the heretic. Inquisitors themselves had been known to succumb to it and join the ranks of the persecuted. It was reputed so deadly an infection that it enveloped the dwellings where heretics had lived. The only safe course was to root out the entire family and burn their effects.

Dante endued the allegorical personality of Love with this mysterious force. He showed himself succumbing to it and introduces it in the Ode which describes his surrender. It was irresistible because Divine.

#### OTHER AMBIGUOUS WORDS

Closely allied in theories of poetic diction and in religious aspiration Dante and Guido Cavalcanti possessed a common tradition in the use of certain words.

The language of the troubadours, the common tongue of the people, readily lent itself to a diversity of meaning. Many

examples could be quoted of the extent to which the best writers played without scruple upon the equivocal sense of the words they used.

The Italian word *Salute* is used in the following senses at the choice of the reader:—Salvation; inclination of the head in greeting; health or well-being; safeguard; security. Used in connection with the eyes, which in Dante's allegory stand for man's highest intellectual aspiration, the word recalls many familiar scriptural phrases as, for instance, 'Mine eyes have seen thy Salvation'. Thus the longed-for salutation of Beatrice takes on an entirely different character.

*Pietà* means either piety or pity or sorrow. It is used indiscriminately for these. But on occasions in the sense of Piety it appears to be used for the rigid Roman dogma and observances in which orthodoxy was bound up.

The word *Morte* is sometimes used in its natural sense of dead, and sometimes, so Dante avowed,<sup>1</sup> to denote the dead in intellect. As the direct corollary of this use of the word *Morte*, the poets appear to employ the word Death to indicate that base feature in the Roman Church which killed the intellect and led men captive in chains to Avarice. The core of the system lay in the detested Courts of the Inquisition, to which it would seem allusion is sometimes made under the fitting symbol of Death.

*Pietra* may simply be a rock, or in allusion to the name of St. Peter it may indicate the Church under its sternest or punitive aspect towards such as were suspected of heresy. The yearning sorrow of Dante's *Pietra* group of poems seems to express the deep dejection with which he beheld himself cut off in spirit from the company of the faithful, passionately longing for union, while deeply wounded by the callous hostility of a Church which had become a Rock of offence.

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. iv, 7. 'Who should be a corpse yet walk the earth'; and again, 'Bad men may rightly be called dead'. The *Inferno* is largely built upon this assumption.



## CHAPTER V

### SELF-DEDICATION

BETWEEN THE first appearance of Beatrice in 1274 and that which occurred in 1283 lay the distinction between the child and the adolescent. Rarely do the religious emotions of childhood lead to action or revolt. They spend themselves in sentiment and dreams.

The crisis which took place in the interior life of Dante during his eighteenth or nineteenth year has all the marks of that instantaneous and explosive process commonly known as 'conversion'. This process, says William James,<sup>1</sup> is in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child's small field of consciousness to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity. Many striking instances, notably that of St. Francis, form a parallel to the vivid and cataclysmic change which Dante at this time underwent in his interior life. It signalled his surrender to a force which dominated his entire nature and completely altered his way of living. It opened up a path of extraordinary toil, in which, though often recoiling from its perils, he persisted to the end.

There is much to suggest that a meeting did take place at the time indicated between himself and the actual maiden whom he loved. His occasional encounters with her appear to have prompted the framework of the narrative, and to have given rise in the surexcited imagination of the adolescent to the visions which succeeded them. In this direction conjecture alone is possible, so closely was the secret guarded.

The manner in which he reacted towards this particular appearance of his Lady is recounted with some detail, marked out as a mystical experience. In the proem to the *Paradiso* Dante stated that like St. Paul he had received celestial visitations.<sup>2</sup> 'Such mystical experiences', Dr. Selwyn observes,<sup>3</sup> 'are not all of the same character. Some

<sup>1</sup> *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

<sup>2</sup> *Epistle*, x, sections 28, 29. See *Letters of Dante*, by Paget Toynbee.

<sup>3</sup> *Essays Catholic and Critical*.

are exterior, *i.e.* the subject believes himself to see the object with his bodily eyes and to hear the words with his bodily ears. Some are "imaginal", *i.e.* the subject is aware that his physical senses are not employed. Others again are "intellectual", *i.e.* the subject is aware of a divine presence and a communication, but without either sense or imagination appearing to be impressed.' The waking visions of the *New Life* provide examples of all three such experiences. Others are expressly recounted as dreams.

On this memorable occasion Beatrice came into his presence robed in purest white; she turned her eyes upon him and for the first time addressed him in audible words. He does not repeat the words. It was of the nature of such mystic speech, he explained in his preface to the *Paradiso*, that he who hears fails to remember, or, remembering, fails to find words in which to set down what he had heard. The moment was one of exquisite joy,<sup>1</sup> 'Methought I beheld the uttermost bounds of blessedness'. 'Such sweetness possessed me that I left everyone and had recourse to the solitude of my own chamber where I set me to think of this most gracious Being.'

There can be no resisting the impression that this appearance of the gracious Being whose name is concealed brought him that vivid apprehension of a new coming of Christ to the heart which is the essence of all conversion. 'On this height', says Ruysbroeck, 'Christ says "Go YE OUT", according to the way of His coming.'

It is evident from the sequence that from this moment Dante dedicated himself to the service of Christ. Allegiance to the Catholic Church was implicit in such a dedication, and the essence of the Catholic Church as manifested to the world lay in the Blessed Sacrament.

It is tolerably clear from the vision which succeeded that in receiving the call Dante was sufficiently alive to the Joachist doctrine and to the evils of the times to regard the Church as dormant. None the less surely did he believe, as St. Francis and St. Dominic and other saints had believed before him, that the call summoned him to revive in the world the spirit of true religion. Whither the call would lead

<sup>1</sup> This condition of spiritual delight has been beautifully described by Dante's contemporary John of Ruysbroeck, in his well-known *Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, Chapters 17-19. 'From this spiritual delight springs spiritual inebriation—the soul receives more sensible joy and sweetness than the heart can either contain or desire.'

him he could not yet perceive. But the subconscious drift of his thoughts was made manifest in the dream which gathered into one picture, as it were, the strands of faith, of yearning desire, and inevitable recoil.

There appeared to him a cloud, coloured as of fire and within it a figure as of a Lord rousing terror by his aspect in all who should behold him. 'And he appeared to me (possessed) with such gladness within himself that it was a thing to marvel at. And in his words he said many things which I understood not, save a few only, among which I understood this: "I am thy Master." In his arms methought I saw one sleeping, naked save that she seemed to me wrapped lightly in a drapery of blood-red hue; whom gazing at very intently I knew to be the Lady of the Salutation, who deigned the day before to salute me. And in one of his hands methought he held a thing that was all aflame; and methought he said to me these words: "Behold thine own heart". And when he had been there awhile, methought he awoke her who slept; and so compelled her by his art that he made her eat that thing which burned within his hand, whereof she ate with doubt. Thereafter he abode but a short while before his gladness turned to bitterest weeping. And so weeping, he gathered this Lady in his arms and methought he went away towards Heaven. Whereat I endured so great anguish that my feeble sleep could not endure but broke and I was awakened'.

## Sonnet 1.

A CIASCUN' ALMA PRESA, E GENTIL CORE

(1) I make a  
salutation  
and ask for  
reply.

To every captive soul and noble heart  
To whom this present word may penetrate,  
Be greeting through their Master; He is Love.  
So may they write me what they think of it.

(2) I signify  
that to which  
reply should  
be made.

Already near a third of the hours were told  
Which mark the time when each star shines on us,  
When Love with sudden shock appeared to me.  
His essence stirs my memory with awe.

Joyous Love seemed to me. He held  
My heart within his hand, and in his arms  
My Lady, sleeping, wrapped within her robe.

Then woke he her. And on this ardent heart  
She, lowlily, as though in fear, did feed.  
After I watched him turn, weeping, away.

In this Vision the substance of the *New Life* narrative is briefly summed up. In the condensed form of a sonnet Dante flung it to the public, daringly exposing to the initiated under the image of a high exalted passion the invidious Spiritual message at that time under the rigorous ban of the Church. He addressed the sonnet, 'To every soul (that hath been) taken captive, to every noble heart', saluting them in the name of LOVE their Lord, and challenging his friends to make reply.

The sleeping figure of Beatrice, which lay within the arms of Love, was thus presented to the eyes of Dante by Love Himself—the burning Love of Christ. Setting figurative language aside, it is the Christ Who here in a vision revealed to Dante the sleeping Church, and revived it momentarily with the heart but recently surrendered without reserve to Himself.

Shielded from contamination of a world not worthy of so holy a Presence, lay the sacred figure. In this lay Beatitude. To revive the spiritual and miraculous emblem of the Church was still within the art of Love, when armed with the burning heart of a true disciple. Once more we behold the act of union accomplished whereby the Bodily Presence of Christ was wont to be communicated to the worshipper. But in this vision it is not the sacred element, but the devout heart which is offered and consumed in the consummation of the perfect sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> A pause ensues. Then is foreshadowed before the awestruck gazer the withdrawal from the earth of the wondrous Miracle lest it be further profaned. Divine Love weeps over the sins which deprive mankind of their Beatitude, and Dante beholds the glorious Lady of his mind borne up to Heaven. It was the beginning of those dark hours of night in which tribulation awaited him.

The *New Life* can then no longer be regarded as a dream picture of a lover's pains. It is transformed to a chapter in the religious history of the times. It paints the withdrawal from the world of the whole Hierarchy, no less than of the Holy Eucharist, as foretold by Joachim and his disciples. It describes the grief experienced by loyal sons of the Church, and by Dante in particular, when they became aware gradually and contrary to their former religious beliefs, that the Miracle in which the Son of God vouchsafed His Presence

<sup>1</sup> 'And here we offer and present unto Thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto Thee.'

was no longer taking place. It unfolds the successive steps through which it gained upon the devout that the passing had finally taken place. Hardly in the privacy of their own chambers did men dare to discuss with one another their new thoughts about the Gospels and the Church, set stirring throughout the century by Joachim and the Franciscans. Some faint notion may then be formed of the sensation created when Dante daringly made public his adhesion to Joachist doctrines, veiled under the image of high exalted earthly passion.

Several poets endeavoured to supply a key to the sonnet. Guido Cavalcanti succeeded best, and his reply was the beginning of a close friendship between himself and Dante, most tragically ended. Cavalcanti was considerably the older of the two, and was an adept in the kind of writing intended only to yield its meaning to the initiate. He revealed with caution his complete comprehension of the sense in which Dante used the image of Love, a sense which may be traced among many poets of the New Style. Love comprised in itself, he says, 'all valour, all joy, and as much of good as man can know'. Love in this sense he acclaimed as the Lord who ruled the world in honour. Where he flourishes there all trouble dies. Love upholds justice with a compassionate mind. He goeth softly to them that sleep (whose intellects are dormant) and, without causing them pain, he draws forth their hearts. 'He drew thy heart from thee', Cavalcanti went on to observe, 'for he noted that Death was calling for thy Lady; he fed her with thy heart, which dreaded her passing. But when it seemed to thee that he departed sorrowing, the dream was sweet, for then was being fulfilled the contrary to sorrow—grace conquering (*la venia vincendo*).’ In all the Joachist literature which has escaped destruction this note is enforced. Dismay and tribulation must perforce attend the passing of the Age of the Son, its ecclesiastics and rites. Yet the disciple confidently awaits the issue, anticipating with joy the dawn of the New Age of the Spirit. Persecution itself is the pledge of victory at hand.

In accord with the above interpretation the narrative of the *New Life* resolves itself into a guarded account, sufficiently intelligible to fellow-disciples, of the manner in which Dante first became acquainted with the doctrines usually termed 'Spiritual'; of the contest which ensued in his mind

between loyalty to the 'old' and the magnetic attraction of the 'new' thought; of the dread period during which he became fully convinced that the miracle of Christ's Real Presence in the Mass, in which the very existence of the Catholic Church was bound up, had been withdrawn; of his final assurance that in its place a new spiritual effulgence of Divine Love had been vouchsafed to gladden mankind.

William James affirms that 'a genuine first-hand religious experience is bound to be a heterodoxy to its witness. If his doctrine proves contagious enough to spread to any others it becomes a definite and labelled heresy. But if it then prove contagious enough to triumph over persecution, it becomes itself an orthodoxy'.

We are to trace in the *New Life* the course of Dante's vivid mystic experience from its birth as a simple heterodox foreboding derived from Joachim, its development into a full-fledged heresy, air-borne, communicable with irresistible power to others. It would seem to the student of the time that it only just failed to triumph over the massed forces of persecution, and establish itself as the most glorious orthodoxy yet cherished by mankind.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE LADY OF THE SCREEN

THE TEST of Conversion lies in the alteration of the life. In years to come, looking back on his past self and judging candidly the youth whom Beatrice summoned to a new life, Dante gave it as his deliberate judgment that there was nothing which might not have been accomplished in him had he remained steadfast to the purpose with which she then inspired him.<sup>1</sup>

Every genuine call inspires the recipient to undertake some definite work for the Master, work for which he is fitted by nature and by grace, though it may be as yet only sub-consciously. It would appear that the call summoned Dante to a quest for truth to be undertaken for the revivifying of the Church. Yet since none can limit the boundaries of any task undertaken by Divine impulsion it was before long made evident to him that the quest for truth involved also the freeing of his own intellect from restrictive opinions imposed by other men. In the circumstances surrounding him it was above all things necessary that even the first steps of his *New Life* should be veiled in secrecy.

#### Section iv.

After the vision he records that his mind became entirely absorbed in thoughts of the most noble Lady. The *Banquet* very plainly exposes the fact that he was far indeed from those idle and lovesick saunterings which have been attributed to him by later poets.

Here he made his readers aware that by this absorption in thoughts of his Lady he meant to indicate intense concentration of the mind on the problems presented to him by Divine Love. He interprets his sighs as intellectual labours. He suggests a new picture of himself spending long days, often far into the night, over the authors likely to shed light upon his perplexities. He wrote, as it were, with familiar knowledge of many of the Latin Fathers of the Church,

<sup>1</sup> *Purgatorio*, xxx, 125-128.

either quoting from their works or introducing them on the scene in the act of using the very words or opinions they had themselves uttered. He referred with measured approval to Gregory, Ambrose, Augustine, John of Damascus, Bede, as important for students of theology, and deplored the fact that they lay neglected on the shelves, covered with cobwebs, the latter touch bespeaking his own observations. He spoke with contempt of the authorities popular in the schools and evidently well known to him. He possessed a surprising intimacy with the works of Thomas Aquinas, then beginning to rise in fame, as they were collected and copied in the monasteries. He had great admiration for the works of St. Bernard. The list is too long to rehearse in this place. It was crowned and completed by a minute knowledge of the Bible, both New and Old Testaments, with the Apocryphal books.

With the call of Divine Love echoing in his heart he seems to have set himself to trace the history of Christian doctrine, more particularly the development of its highest rites, as deducible from the writings of great Catholic divines. In the dim light available he pursued his researches, poring over one almost indecipherable parchment after another, reaching new and unforeseen conclusions, devoured by doubts, shadowed always by suspicion, as he forged his way to the truth. Was it any wonder that his health began to give way under the strain?

It is tolerably clear that nowhere, save at the University or in the shelter of a monastery, could he have obtained either the undisturbed leisure for such researches or the manuscripts needed to carry out the extensive course of reading to which his writings testify. It is necessary to consider briefly the circumstances of his life during the years of difficulty and high emotion to which the *New Life* testifies.

By the year 1283 Dante had lost both his parents. His nearest kinsman, who might naturally exercise considerable influence if not authority over him, was deeply engaged in a family vendetta, of which Dante makes mention in the *Inferno*, and was trying to drag Dante into it. The district of Romagna, bordering on Tuscany, had lately been plunged into civil war by the Papal annexation. Recruits were being eagerly swept into the war on either side. It was almost an impossibility for any young man unless under powerful protection to resist the pressure upon him to take



sides in the very cruel and senseless civil warfare then in progress.

It is important to realise that Dante, despite his passionate invocations to Henry VII., was a convinced anti-militarist during his whole life. He reckoned the descent of the Emperor on Italy as the prelude to universal peace. The war which ensued was a war to end war—one last struggle to subdue for ever those who resisted lawful authority. He held in detestation the incessant civil wars which ravaged every part of Italy, and he had the courage even as a young man to resist the efforts made to drag him into the quagmire.

To become either a priest or a monk would have relieved him of bearing arms. But he did not desire to pursue either course. It would seem that he was sufficiently alive to the evils of the monastic system and the abuses connected with the priesthood to shrink from taking the vows which were involved. Even thus early he went seeking liberty.

There is a strong tradition, however, that he joined the Tertiary Order of the Franciscans and became for a time at any rate a Brother of Penitence. The Rule was simple and was well suited to men who wished to pursue their own way of life without interference. It did not debar the Brothers from marriage, or impose restrictions other than to lead virtuous lives and observe short private devotions. All the Brothers, however, were prohibited from bearing arms and from taking an oath. During the thirteenth century the Tertiary Order spread over the whole of Europe and became extraordinarily popular. It was the one power which acted as a protection against compulsory participation in the continual wars of aggression. We may think of such wars as mere exercises in personal prowess, and it is true that the weapons employed were less devastating than high explosives. But the horrible custom of inflicting personal mutilation, the savage slaughter of prisoners, the weapon of starvation, the burning and torture which accompanied them, struck terror in the spectator. To participate in such deeds even from afar was reckoned by the Brethren as an accursed thing. Frederic II vainly complained he could get no recruits for his army owing to this league, but he could find no remedy, so securely were the Brethren shielded from taking part in warfare by their rule.

We venture to suggest that it was this Screen behind which Dante secured himself in the 'months and years' when he

pursued his quest for truth. It is doubtful whether as an ordinary student at the University he could have resisted pressure upon him to take arms. But as a Brother of Penitence he could have kept his terms at Bologna or spent long periods in Florence in the shelter of a monastery, undisturbed.

The account of himself which he gives in his guarded *New Life* narrative tallies with this hypothesis.

A startling change had taken place in his whole demeanour and habits. Many of his friends, noticing his feeble state, began to be anxious about him. Moreover, he says, 'Many, full of spite, made pursuit of me to find out what I wished above all things to conceal from others'. We are reminded of the urgent instructions issued to Inquisitors to place under observation all whose mode of life underwent alteration. Surrounded by malicious spies he could easily perceive that the questions casually addressed to him had a deeper motive than idle curiosity. 'By the will of Love', who took command over him by counsel of Reason, he told them neither more nor less than the truth. It was Love that ruled him. 'And when they asked me: "On whose account has Love played such havoc with thee?" I looked them smiling in the face and said no more.' As a sop to rumour nothing could have been more effectual.

It was not likely, however, that Inquisitors would be satisfied for long without some reason for Dante's mysterious conduct. So marked a change in a young man from frivolous pursuits to ascetic absorption in study indicated something deeper than a licentious escapade. He became aware that he must provide a plausible explanation of his altered habits, his frequent fasts and his neglect of pleasure, so characteristic of the 'heretics'. There are passages in the *New Life* suggesting that Dante was at this time in close association with monks.

Section v.  
A Monastic  
Ideal.

'It happened one day that the seat of the most Noble One was in that locality wherein words of the Queen of Glory were being heard. And I was in a place from which I perceived my Beatitude. And midway between her and me, along the direct line, was the seat of a noble Lady of most attractive appearance, who often glanced at me, wondering at my look, which seemed to find its end in her, whereby many became aware of her glance. And so far was heed

given to it that as I went from this place I heard them say behind me: "See how such a Lady makes havoc of this man's person." And by their naming her I understood they were speaking of what stood midway in the direct line which started from the most noble Beatrice and ended in mine eyes. Then I comforted me greatly being certain that my secret had not been made common to others that day by my looks. And instantly I bethought me to make this noble Lady a Screen for the truth. And I made such a show of it shortly that most of the people who were talking about me believed they knew my secret. With this Lady I concealed myself some months and years. And in order to make the rest believe it, I composed for her certain little things in rhyme which I do not mean to write down here, except in so far as they served to treat of that most noble Beatrice. And therefore I will let them all go, save that I will write something from them which may seem like praise of her.'

It has been seen how naturally abstract ideas, which being of feminine gender in Latin and Italian are grammatically alluded to as 'she' and 'her', become transferred, both in art and literature, into the likeness of 'Ladies'. Indisputably each Lady presented as a rival to Beatrice must allegorically lie in the same category as she. Beatrice, the gift of Heaven, the Nine, the Miracle, is invariably presented as a manifestation of the Divine. And no object of mundane passion could rank with her as a *Lady*. All are varying demonstrations of illuminating grace whereby man may find Beatitude. Testing this theory by its application to the Lady whom Dante used as a Screen, it may be suggested that she figured some monastic ideal, possibly the Franciscan Rule, and that in adopting her for a defence Dante allowed it to be believed that he contemplated embracing the religious life. In relating the incident on which this mystification was founded, he supplied a strong hint that it took place during Divine service 'when the praises of the Queen of Glory were resounding'. The religious vocation might, without straining the point, be very well described as occupying a position mid-way between himself and Beatrice. It presented strong attractions to a man of Dante's temperament and, sternly though he condemned the abuses of the monastic system in his day, he invariably spoke with reverence of its high ideals. Indeed, with its new revelation of the

Love of Christ and its pure Gospel teaching, the Rule of Francis was universally esteemed in the early years of the Order a Divine thing, with which it was impious even for the Pope himself to tamper. It might naturally seem to the pious monks that his gaze, bent on discovering spiritual reality, found its end in the Cloister, which, in that it implied complete surrender of the soul to God, was indeed half-way in a direct line towards the attainment of union with Christ by means of his Blessed Sacrament. All that was mysterious in Dante's behaviour would assume a normal aspect so soon as it was ascertained that he was preparing to be a monk. His studies and change of interests were fully accounted for. His pallor and emaciated looks were plausibly attributed, were indeed probably due, to the rigours of the monastic life. In hymning the joys of the religious vocation he was in effect hymning the Blessed Gift round which it centred. Some of the compositions he wrote for the monks are actually incorporated in the *New Life*, and it can be seen that they are vastly more like hymns than lyrics of earthly love.

In hymning the sixty fair ladies of the city 'Where my Lady was placed by the most high Lord', was he not, perhaps, composing for the monks an act of devotion in which the virtues which adorn the City of Christ's Church are enumerated as they accompany and ennoble the Religious Life? In a beautiful passage in the *Banquet*, which compares the peace of the Empyrean Heaven to the Divine Science which is full of peace and is in effect the peace promised by Christ to His followers, the words of Solomon are quoted: 'Sixty are the queens, and eighty are the concubines, and of young maidens there is no number; one is my Dove and my perfect one'. And he explains that all the sciences are called queens and paramours and handmaidens, making it clear that by sciences in this place he means celestial virtues or qualities.<sup>1</sup>

Section vi.  
The Sixty  
Fair Ladies.

Time passed on. Mystic time is measured only by the sequence of emotions. But Dante definitely affirmed that by the aid of *this Lady* he concealed himself 'some months and years'.

Section vii.  
The Screen  
fails.

'At length it befell that the Lady with whom I had so

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, c. 15.

long concealed my will must depart from the afore-mentioned city, and go into a far country. So that I, "quasi sbigottito," bewildered and dismayed for lack of the beautiful defence which had failed me, was much disquieted, more than I myself would have believed possible before it happened. And thinking that if I did not speak somewhat sorrowfully of her departure, people would become aware that I had been hiding something, I proposed to make a kind of lament in a sonnet which I shall write out, because my Lady was the immediate cause of certain words which are in the sonnet, as is clear to him who understands.'

In his prose account of the 'Lady's' departure Dante cast an air of nonchalance over the incident, almost as though he were feigning a grief he felt in duty bound to express. Yet the word 'sbigottito' he used about himself is a very strong one, and he reveals that his perturbation of mind was a surprise even to himself.

The lyrics scattered throughout the *New Life* are for the most part more obscure in diction than the prose narrative. On that account they were perhaps less jealously scanned for phrases discovering dangerous doctrines. In many instances they present a startling contrast in tone of thought to the circumstances previously recorded, and it seems probable that the kernel of a hidden mystery is glanced at in some of the cryptic lines which baffle interpretation.

The succeeding sonnet is a very peculiar composition, if it is to be taken as occasioned by the departure from Florence of a lady in whom, while she was there, Dante had taken only a feigned interest.

## Sonnet 2.

O VOI, CHE LA VIA D'AMOR PASSATE

(1) I intend  
to summon  
the faithful  
servants of  
Love, by  
those words of  
the prophet  
Jeremiah, 'O  
all ye who  
pass by pause and see if there be any sorrow like to mine', and I pray that they bear to hear me.

O ye who on the way of Love pass by  
Behold and see  
If there be any sorrow like to mine;  
I pray you solely that you bear to hear me—  
Then picture to yourselves the thing I am,  
Hostel of every torment and the key.

## THE LADY OF THE SCREEN

Love, surely not because of my scant goodness,  
But of his own nobility,  
Found me a way of life so sweet and calm  
I heard them say behind me many times:  
'What dignity has been conferred on him  
'To make his heart so gay?'

Now I have lost all my exultant joy,  
Its source lay in the treasure lent by Love.  
This gone—how poor I'm left  
Fear hindereth to tell.

So, willing to behave like such as lack  
And hide their nakedness for very shame,  
I make an outward show of cheerfulness  
The while within my heart I yearn and weep.

(2) I relate  
where Love  
had placed  
me, and this  
with other  
meaning than  
the last parts  
of the Sonnet  
show: and I  
say that  
which I have  
lost [in the  
shelter of the  
Cloister].

It will be seen that the Lady of the Screen is not even mentioned in this purely religious lament. The words, 'Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow. . . wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me', were those he used later on to accentuate his conviction that Beatrice no longer remained on earth. They are the words appropriated by long tradition to express the anguish of the Church in the death of the Son of Man. And just as the prophet foresaw and expressed in his Lamentation the desolate condition of the Jewish Church before it was superseded by its Christian successor, so did the followers of Olivi apply this lament to the inevitable break-up of the Carnal Church before it was superseded by a purer dispensation in the Age of the Spirit.

The surmise that the screen employed by Dante to hide his devotion to Beatrice was some monastic ideal, such as offered in the Tertiary Rule of Francis, is borne out by the events of his time. The call of Beatrice came to him in 1283. He concealed his secret under the beautiful defence 'for some months or years' until it abandoned him. And it was in 1288 that Nicholas IV began the movement against the Spirituals known as the Fifth Tribulation. One of his measures, proclaimed with the air of making a valuable concession, was to cut away the great privilege of the Tertiary Order, their right to abstain from bearing arms, and grant them a dispensation to fight in the Church's quarrels. It was at this time, then, in 1288-9, that we find Dante enrolled

as a member of the Guelfic League bearing arms against the exiled Ghibellines.

Section viii.  
The Un-  
named  
Martyr.

It was now that a mysterious death occurred which occasioned Dante bitter distress and drew from him two stern sonnets. The incident is recorded in very guarded fashion. There is no clue whatever to the identity of the 'young and most noble lady' whose body he himself beheld rest of its soul. But under the figure of Death, so vehemently reprehended, is there not some reason to suspect a personification of the most hated tribunal of the Carnal Church, that of the Inquisition? This is particularly evident in the sonnet beginning 'Morte villan'. The apparently empty and rhetorical denunciations of Death assume terrible significance if applied to the Inquisition Courts:—'Enemy of pity'; 'ancient mother of anguish'; 'oppressive judgment which admits of no argument or defence' (*incontrastabile*); 'guilty of every guilt'; 'iniquity not hidden from any'; 'kindling the wrath of all who from henceforth shall be nurtured of Love'. There is a ring here of unmistakable personal indignation which suggests that the noble soul, thus iniquitously done to death, may have been an intimate of Dante, one of the ardent younger men whom Inquisitors feared and against whom they had instituted a terrible campaign of repression.

## Sonnet 3.

## PIANGETE, AMANTI, POICHÈ PIANGE AMORE

(1) I summon  
and implore  
the faithful  
servants of  
Love to weep  
and I say that  
their Lord  
weeps and  
that hearing  
the reason  
why he  
weeps they  
may rouse  
themselves to  
listen to me.

(2) I tell the  
reason.

(3) I speak of  
a certain  
honour Love  
conferred  
upon this  
noble soul.

Weep, lovers—Love himself is weeping—  
And hear the cause that stirreth him to tears.  
Love hears while holy men entreat your pity,  
Betraying in their eyes their bitter grief.

Because Death in his depravity hath wrought  
His cruel handiwork on noble heart,  
Blasting what men esteem in noble heart  
Except for honour more than aught else below.

Listen what honour Love hath done to him;  
For I saw Him make lament in very form  
Over the goodly image Death hath struck.

Often he upward gazed into the Heaven  
Wherein finds place already that dear soul,  
That once bore semblance of such gaiety.

# THE LADY OF THE SCREEN

## MORTE VILLANA, DI PIETÀ NEMICA

Thou Death depraved, foe to all piety,  
Ancient mother of anguish,  
Judgment without appeal, oppressive,  
Since it is thou hast given my heavy heart  
The matter wherefore I go pondering,  
My tongue shall tire in uttering thy reproach.

And if of mercy I would beggar thee  
I must declare thy blunders,  
Iniquitous, inflicting every wrong;  
Not that it's hidden from the people,  
But to inflame with wrath because of it  
Him who by Love hereafter shall be nurtured.

From out our age thou hast chased courtesy  
And virtue, meet to be esteemed in souls;  
In time of youth thou hast destroyed  
Light-hearted gaiety which Love bestows.

What soul was this I will not more disclose  
Than by those qualities of his all know;  
Ne'er may that man, (he merits not salvation),  
Hope to be numbered in his company.

### Sonnet 4.

(1) I summon  
Death by  
certain  
appropriate  
names.

(2) Address-  
ing Death I  
tell the  
reason why I  
am moved to  
reprove it.

(3) I upbraid  
Death.

(4) I turn to  
address a  
person whom  
I do not  
define, albeit  
he is defined  
in my own  
meaning.

In the last two lines trenchant emphasis is laid on the notorious character of the person responsible for this death, and the analysis of the sonnet plainly intimates that in reprehending one who could never hope to rejoin the Victim in Heaven, the author had a special person in mind. Piccing this passionate rebuke into the history of the times, we venture to urge that we have in the two sonnets no mere empty dirge, but an outspoken contemporary denunciation of the Inquisition Courts only paralleled in the writings of Jean de Meung. We do well to ask ourselves in what way the ardent minds of that day reacted against the vile underground iniquities perpetrated by ecclesiastical authority—with what feelings men stood by to watch the sentence enforced against their comrade, the pyre raised, the victim consumed in torment or, less mercifully even, despatched to a lingering death in some underground dungeon. Human nature was the same then as now. It may not be doubted



## THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

that men felt about these crimes exactly as the modern undergraduate would feel in witnessing the execution of a friend for conscience' sake, could such things in this age be repeated.

From this time Dante passed under a new and stimulating influence, which drew him farther than before from the old ideals.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE TRUE DEFENCE

SHORTLY AFTER the death had occurred which so deeply moved his indignation, Dante was riding, he tells us, in the company of a great many others, on an errand which was exceedingly distasteful to him. He was bitterly conscious as he rode of travelling further and further from his 'beatitude'. The circumstances suggest that he may have made part of a military expedition. The *New Life* period covered those years 1288-1290, during which he was called up to serve in the Guelfic League against Ghibelline forces, and his grief and bitterness of spirit are comprehensible enough if he were reluctantly taking part in one of those acts of reprisals so common in medieval warfare, when whole villages in enemy territory were burnt and their occupants harried. If this were so, he might well be aware that every step took him further from the Presence of God. Section IX.

A passing pilgrim, meanly habited, seems to have turned his thoughts in another direction. Whether or no he did actually meet a wayfarer such as he describes it is not possible to decide. It seems probable, however, that there was a substratum of fact in all these visions. The figure may have been one of those wandering Evangelists in the disguise of monk or troubadour, who braved the worst dangers in order to carry the light of the Gospel into every part of the country. To the vivid imagination of Dante it was Love himself, the Lord to whom he had surrendered his heart. The figure appeared dismayed, turning his eyes to the ground, a suitable attitude were rapine and slaughter indeed in progress. 'He seemed to have lost dominion', the sonnet more plainly declares, and in such campaigns Love became, indeed, of no account.

'He seemed to glance' from time to time at a beautiful stream of swiftly running and very clear (living) water, which flowed by the way. Figuratively, this suggests the

living water of Gospel Truth,<sup>1</sup> a scriptural symbol in universal use, which directs the attention of the alert reader to the passage in the Apocalypse: 'And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb'.

Maybe the Evangelist was himself furtively studying one of those translated fragments of the Gospels, which if detected brought destruction on the possessor. It seemed to Dante in that hour that Love, ruling his heart anew, addressed him, speaking with an interior voice in his soul and saying:

'I come from that Lady who hath been thy long defence, and I know that her return will not be for a great time. And hence I have with me that heart which I made thee have for her, and I bear it to a Lady who shall be thy defence as this was; and he mentioned her to me by name so that I knew her well. But nevertheless if thou tell any part of these words which I have spoken to thee, tell them in such a way that the feigned love which thou hast shown to this, and which thou wilt be compelled to show another, be not unveiled through them.'

Sonnet 5.

CAVALCANDO L'ALTR' IER PER UN GAMMINO

(1) I say how  
I found Love  
and what he  
seemed to be.

But lately, I was riding on a road,  
Thoughtful about my journey which displeased me,  
When in the middle of the way I met,  
In the scant habit of a pilgrim, Love.  
He seemed to me in outward semblance mean,  
As though he'd lost his high dominion,  
Sighing and full of thoughts he came along  
And with his head down lest he see the folk.

(2) I say what  
he spoke to  
me, but not  
completely,  
for fear of my  
secret being  
discovered.

Beholding me he called me by my name  
And said: 'I come from that far distant place  
'Where once, at my behest, thy heart was set:  
'I bring it back to serve a new delight.'

(3) I say how  
he  
disappeared.

Forthwith I reft from him so great a share  
He disappeared: how I could not perceive.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Eckhart, *Sermon xvii.* 'Like water flowing in a channel so does the Eternal Word flow through its teachers.'

Rendered in verse, the Vision assumes a definitely spiritual aspect. Always there is a hint of the divine about the person of Love, and when, in the act of vanishing from mortal sight Love bestows himself richly on the Lover, we are reminded that 'he who dwelleth in Love, dwelleth in God and God in him'. A new phase of spiritual life opened out. A new delight, assuredly intellectual, for we are told it was not sensual in its nature, enticed him. It was a message instantaneously acceptable, but none the less received with misgiving.<sup>1</sup>

The message conveyed by Love was presented, both in prose and verse, as an enigma. Some part only of it was to be made public. It disclosed a secret which, however, could only be understood when certain missing words were inserted. We are to understand, then, that the message as it stands conveys a misleading impression. It *implies* that Dante was to offer a feigned love to a new defence. But on close examination it can be clearly perceived that no such thing was actually stated.

We venture to suggest that in this apparently accidental encounter we have the occasion on which the spiritual doctrine, opposed to the abuses of the papacy, secured the allegiance of Dante for the first time. Let it be assumed that he had lost the orthodox refuge long afforded him in the Tertiary Order. By the action of Nicholas IV rigid rule had been imposed where once freedom reigned. Strict enquiry was being made into the orthodoxy of the Brethren, and large numbers of them preferred to sever the loose ties which bound them to the Order rather than obey a Rule which they could no longer recognise as that of Francis. The Rule of Francis was universally regarded as a Divine manifestation. This in its purest form indissolubly linked with its ideal of holy poverty and renunciation of worldly strife had been banished, so the Franciscans believed, nor was there hope of its early return. No longer could Dante conceal in the Cloister his ardent aspirations after truth under cover of association with the spiritually minded Brethren. The monks with whom he was in agreement were undergoing persecution. New Superiors, hostile and suspicious, were installed. Gravely disquieted at the policy of the Church, under whose banner he was perforce committed to acts from which his

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Banquet*, Bk. II, c. 10. My soul recognised its own disposition, well adapted to receive the impulse of this Lady, and therefore feared her.

conscience revolted, Dante was fully prepared to accept the Joachist doctrine of the Spiritual Church cherished by the Fraticelli. He knew it well when Love whispered its name.

The Spiritual Church stands clearly revealed in Holy Writ as pure and spotless. 'Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.'<sup>1</sup> 'Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it... that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.'<sup>2</sup> So, too, in spotless purity the Divine Seer beheld the Church under the image of the Holy City, New Jerusalem 'coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.'<sup>3</sup> The Spirituals accepted such passages, not as descriptive of the saints in glory, but as a prophecy soon to be fulfilled of the purified Church of the Spirit to be established on earth.

To identify this pure vision of truth with the Curia in its lust for wealth reduced men to despair. It was the part of Love to discriminate between the two, and to point out to Dante in this hour of deep dejection the true object of his allegiance. In this 'Lady', or manifestation of Divine Truth, he would find a defence against doubt, a new joy for his soul. As for feigned love, the kind of harmless deception he had practised during his close association with the monks, that was now at an end. But he must still go on feigning. The times were dangerous and his aims suspected. Only from now on the dissimulation must be turned in another direction. It was to the Carnal Church, the all-powerful temporal organisation under which he was actually serving, that he must offer a loyalty which was no longer dictated by his heart. In the guarded announcement, avowedly so worded as not to betray his secret, of a feigned love to be offered to *another*, there is nothing to link 'another' (*altrui*) with the promised new delight. But there is much in the history of the times to suggest that he and others like-minded with himself were compelled by resistless force to display outward reverence in presence, for example, of spurious relics, counterfeit miracles, and much else which they despised. Thus while the image of the Spiritual Church presented itself to his mind as a pure ideal distinct from the Roman hierarchy, the perception of a compulsory feigned allegiance

<sup>1</sup> *Canticus*, iv, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ephesians*, v, 25, 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Revelation*, xxi, 2.

to be offered reluctantly to the dominant authority accompanied the new manifestation.

‘After my return I betook me to search after this Lady whom my Lord had named to me in the Way of Sighs. And that my speech may be the more brief I say that within a short time I made her so greatly my Defence that a number of persons spoke of it beyond the bounds of courtesy so that it often weighed heavily on me. And for this cause, that is to say this outrageous rumour which seemed to defame me of vice, that most noble one, the destroyer of all vices and Queen of all virtues, passing along a certain way denied me her Salutation of surpassing sweetness in which stood all my Beatitude.’

Section x.  
The Rumour  
of [heretical]  
Depravity.

The search after this Lady pursued with so much ardour suggests an examination into the passages of Holy Writ, perhaps also of the Latin Fathers, which relate to the Church of Christ. Promises of her immunity from evil were desperately discredited by the abuses of the actual Church. To this prophets and apostles, saints and schoolmen bear witness, indicating plainly that they distinguished the Church of the Spirit, ever pure and ever triumphant, from the Church of worldly composition, ill governed, debased by the vices of its rulers. We conceive Dante, aided perhaps by others, making deep researches into this aspect of the Church Militant here on earth, ceaselessly under observation from superiors outwardly sympathetic, until the bent of his studies was detected and he found himself under suspicion. If these, indeed, be the adventures of Dante's mind, not of his body, then there is strong reason for believing that the vice which seemed to defame him in this crisis was that of ‘heretical depravity’, more perilous by far to the transgressor than the worst infraction of moral law. The qualified mode of expression implies that there was no actual denunciation. But the rumour was persistent enough to bring him grave disquiet.

It was at this moment that the most noble Beatrice denied him her Salutation. Are we to understand by this that the overpowering consolation hitherto vouchsafed him in the Mass visited him no longer, that when the great Miracle brought in its train assurance of Salvation (*salutazione*) to others, he was left dry and lifeless in spirit, shut out from the

Divine Presence? The full meaning of the Salutation is made apparent in the succeeding chapter, wherein its purely spiritual quality identical with the burning faith and charity of the soul rapt into communion with its Lord, is exposed.

But the allegory of the *New Life* seems to be founded throughout on actual happenings which are woven into the central theme and form its background, catching a spiritual reflection from the interior life. If we may venture to surmise that some rumour of Dante being engaged in illicit studies found its way to the maiden he loved, there can be no question that it would cause her dismay and that (perhaps under pressure from those who directed her conscience) she might be induced to display her displeasure openly.

Section xi.  
The  
Salutation of  
Beatrice.

'I say that when she appeared from any direction, through hope of this wonderful Salvation, I had no enemy left, for there swept over me a flame of charity which brought me to pardon whomsoever had offended me. And if any one had interrogated me about anything whatever, my response, with face veiled in humility, would have been solely 'Love'. And when she drew nearer to giving her Salutation, a spirit of Love, destroying all the other spirits of sense, stimulated the feeble spirits of sight, and said to them: 'Go forth for the honouring of our Lady', and in place of them there remained Love. And whosoever had desired to know Love, observing the tremor of my eyes, might do so. And when this most noble Lady gave her Salutation, Love formed no medium such as might shield me from a Beatitude too great to be borne, but in his surpassing sweetness he seemed to have such an effect that my body being entirely under his rule moved like some heavy thing without life. From this it is clearly shown that my Beatitude had its dwelling in her Salutation, which many times exceeded and overflowed my capacity.'

Mention is here made for the first time of the conflict of the senses, which constituted so important a part of the doctrine of Transubstantiation. At the supreme moment when the priest declared, '*Hoc est corpus meum*', all the sense perceptions of the worshipper—save only that of hearing—were held in abeyance by devotion. This was precisely what Dante seems to have meant when he declared his own 'spirits of sense' to be destroyed by Love when Beatrice

## THE TRUE DEFENCE

came near to bestow on him Salvation. The 'feeble spirits of Sight' received a special command, for it was they which were most prone to rebel against the actuality of a complete change of elements. For the honouring of their Lady it was essential they should leave their natural organs and register no message to the brain. This is no mere fanciful notion. It is implicit in the venerable hymn, 'Tantum ergo Sacramentum', rendered as follows in English:

Down in adoration falling, lo the sacred Host we hail.  
Lo, o'er ancient forms departing, newer rites of grace  
prevail;  
Faith for all defects supplying, where the feebler senses  
fail.<sup>1</sup>

The theme was a favourite one, much debated in the Middle Ages. Jacopone da Todi, in his 46th *Lauda* on the Holy Eucharist, has a stanza echoing the very words which Dante used in describing the effect on his senses of the approach of Beatrice:

So with these eyes within my head  
I see the Sacrament Divine,  
The priest upon the Altar shows  
Bread in clear visibility.  
The light which comes to me through faith  
Another demonstration makes  
To the eyes that I possess within  
The intellectual mind.

Four of my senses plainly say:  
'This is but bread indeed'.  
Hearing alone resists their claim.  
Each one of them remains without,  
Beneath these forms which can be seen  
Christ standeth all concealed.  
Thus to the soul He gives Himself  
In this mysterious Rite.

There are other parallels with the *New Life* in this Song of Jacopone. Dante often lays stress on the disappearance from his heart of all bitterness at the approach of his Lady.

<sup>1</sup> Tantum ergo Sacramentum Veneremur cernui;  
Et antiquum documentum Novo cedat ritui;  
Praestet fides supplementum Sensuum defectui.



He had no enemy left; a flame of charity made him pardon every offence committed against him. Jacopone thus also describes the effect of the Sacrament:

Come and behold this Miracle.  
Now I have power to love my neighbour,  
No trouble doth afflict me now  
In any loss, if him I can protect;  
Easy it is to me to pardon him  
For any injury done.

These two themes, the repression of the evidence of the senses, and specially of sight, in the presence of the Miracle, and the disappearance of every taint of rancour, will be found recurring as the narrative advances.

Section XII.  
The New  
Vision of  
Love.

'When my Beatitude was denied me there came upon me such bitter grief that leaving everyone I went away to a solitary place to bathe the earth with most bitter tears. And after this weeping was a little assuaged I went into my room where I could lament without being overheard. And there, calling for mercy on the Lady of courtesy, and saying: "Love help thy faithful servitor", I fell asleep like a little beaten child.'

'It happened as in the midst of my sleep, that I seemed to see in my room, seated beside me, a youth<sup>1</sup> clothed in very white garments and deep in thought to judge by his appearance. He looked again upon me as I lay there, and, when he had gazed awhile, sighing he seemed to call me and said these words:—"Fili mi, tempus est ut praetermittantur simulacra nostra". Then methought I knew him, because he called me thus as many times he had already called me in my dreams.'

The vision seems to present in dramatic form the manner of Dante's first actual surrender to the New Intelligence of Love. The mystic words, 'My son, now is it time to discontinue the use of images', reflect a constant injunction

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Eckhart's *Sermon xxxvii* on 'Young Man Arise'. The young man stands for the Intellect. When the soul is dead in imperfection, the higher mind, awakening into understanding cries to God for grace. Then God gives it divine light, and it becomes self-knowing—we must bear in mind that anything not far from birth is young.

found in mystic writers, such as Dionysius and Meister Eckhart.<sup>1</sup> They embody the leading tenets of the Spirituals. By the preliminary device of the Lady of the Screen the uninitiated reader has been led to take the word 'simulacra' for pretences or feigning. But the images or counterfeits Dante was to lay aside were not spurious mistresses. A *simulacrum* in classical usage is the image, representation or likeness of a god.<sup>2</sup> May we not understand that Dante was receiving a warning from his monitor that the sacraments as outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace were no longer to hold the first place in the worship of God? In those dark ages of Papal corruption the prophet Joachim's message handed on, within the Church and outside it, for nearly a hundred years and now powerfully preached by Olivi, that the ordinances of the Church were passing just as the sacrifices of the Old Testament had passed, came with irresistible force as a new revelation of truth. It was a message which embodied also a new revelation of God's Love. For if the Sacraments were abrogated, the stern limitation of God's Love solely to their recipients must go too. The Love of God assumed a new aspect. From now on it will be seen that Dante began to be aware that God was withdrawing from the Church the crown of sacramental grace which had been trodden under foot by her unworthy servants.

Love wept, gazing still on Dante, as though expecting an answer. So had Love wept in the sonnet which forms the prelude to the entire theme, and weeping was himself beheld bearing away from earth the prized Gift of God.

'Whereon, taking confidence, I began to speak thus with him:

" 'Lord of nobility, why weepest thou?' " And he said these

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Albertus Magnus. 'When thou prayest, shut thy door, that is the door of thy senses. Keep them barred and bolted against all phantasies and images.' Eckhart, *Ser. 1*. Images all enter through the senses. . . . God needs no image and has no image; without image, likeness or means does God work in the soul, aye in her ground whereinto no image did ever get but only Himself with His own Essence. . . . Thus He unites Himself with her. Were any image present there would not be real union, and in real union lies the whole Beatitude.

<sup>2</sup> In the Vulgate the words which end the First Epistle of St. John, 'Little children keep yourselves from idols', run 'Filioli, custodite vos a simulacris'.

words:—"Ego tamquam centrum circuli cui simili modo se habent circumferentie partes :—tu autem non sic".<sup>1</sup>

'Then thinking over his words, it seemed to me he had spoken very obscurely, so that I compelled myself to speak and I said these words:—"What is it my Lord that thou speakest with such obscurity?" And he said to me in the vulgar tongue:—"Ask no more than may be useful to thee".

'I am as the centre of the circle to which all parts of the circumference bear equal relation; but with thee it is not so.'

The Circle is the symbol for God. Its centre is Love, for God is Love. From every part of the circumference accordant lines or truths converge to the centre and bear witness to Love from which one and all radiate. Nowhere save from this central standpoint can the unity and harmonious perfection of the circle be apprehended. Dante discovered in this hour that his standpoint was wrong. From the point where his feet were set no harmony was possible. Thus he was led to perceive the reconciling power of the Gospel of Eternal Love. It was but a step from this to the perception that his loss of Beatitude implied a loss of Love.

The passage which deals once more with the denial of the Salutation is designedly cryptic, but sufficiently intelligible if the Lady named in the Path of Sighs be identified with the Spiritual as distinct from the Carnal Church.

'And then I began to speak with him of the Salutation which had been denied me, and I asked him the cause. Whereupon he made reply to me, after this fashion:—"This our Beatrice heard from certain persons who were speaking about thee, that the Lady, whom I named to thee in the path of Sighs, had received annoyance from thee. And hence this most noble one who is contrary to all trouble deigned not to salute thy person for fear it be a source of annoyance. Hence, since some part verily of thy secret is known to her through long wont, I desire thee to say certain words in rhyme in which thou shalt make known the force

<sup>1</sup> Eckhart, *Sermon* LXXV. Beginners of the virtuous life should do as he does who describes a circle: the starting point once fixed, he keeps it so and then the trace is good. In other words, learn first to fix the heart on God, on good and on good works.

I hold over thee through her, and how early in childhood thou wast hers . . . and by this she shall perceive the direction of thy will and shall understand the words of them that are deceived . . .”’

To profess allegiance to an ideal spiritual Church in contradistinction to the degenerate organisation acclaimed as ‘universal, catholic, militant’, was not unnaturally to be exposed to the indignation of the authorities. The doctrine of the ideal Church was all the more vexatious that it was very difficult to refute. The notion that Christ had planted in the world a Church capable of corruption, that simoniacal Popes and prelates, with all their train of greedy placemen, made part of the Divine scheme, could hardly be suggested. Shorn of its admitted abuses the Church stood radiant, spiritually all-powerful. But what of its rulers? Burdened with riches they stood outside an ideal centred on holy poverty. They were self-exposed as usurpers. Hence the annoyance which was occasioned when some part of Dante’s secret studies leaked out. ‘My Lady Pietà’, under the guise of the Inquisition, may have decided that injury was being caused to the Holy Catholic Church by Dante’s suspected allegiance to a Church of the Spirit. His orthodoxy was, in fact, too sound; it impugned that of the authorities.

The kernel of his life-long loyalty to the Church, no less than of his life-long hostility to the Papal Curia, lies embedded in this knotty episode. The Lady whom he took for his Defence was the Spiritual Church of Christ, nursed in poverty, immaculate, whose guerdon was suffering for others, whose seal was Love. He kept this cherished ideal sharply differentiated in his mind from the framework of the existing Roman Church, and could thus reconcile an attitude of unswerving loyalty to the Catholic Church with the most uncompromising denunciations of the Carnal Church which usurped her functions.

In this early stage of receiving and testing Olivi’s doctrine he was tentatively feeling his way and earnestly deprecating any misunderstanding with the authorities. He believed it possible to justify his new position, and in the form of a Ballad he pleaded that, though his ‘countenance had changed’, his devotion to the Holy Mystery adored in youth had never altered. The Love (of Christ) constrained him ‘with heart unchanged to gaze upon another’. A

spiritual ideal transcending all temporal ecclesiastical ordinances claimed his devotion, but it did not eclipse his former faith. This note is peculiarly characteristic of Dante's religion as revealed to us in his works.

BALLATA, IO VO' CHE TU RITRUVI AMORE

(1) In the first part I tell my Ballad where it is to go, and comfort it so that it may go more securely; and I say into whose company it is to place itself, if it would go securely and without danger.

Ballad, I will thou find out Love again  
And go with him to the presence of my Lady,  
So that my Lord may then discourse with her  
About my plea. Of this thou art to sing.  
Thou goest, Ballad, with such courtesy  
That even unaccompanied  
Thou mightest in every place be bold;  
But if thou wouldest fare securely  
First find out Love again;  
Without him it is not well haply to stir  
Because she who should listen to thee  
Is stirred to wrath against me, so I think,  
And wert thou not accompanied by Love  
Might swift put thee to shame.

(2) In the second part I tell what it appertains to the Ballad to make known.

With gentle melody, when thou art with Love,  
Begin these words:  
But first thou wilt implore compassion—  
' My Lady, he who sendeth me to you  
' Desires you will receive, when it shall please you,  
' His plea such as it is, from me.  
' Love is what makes him change his countenance.  
' Love working through thy beauty at his will.  
' Ponder it well then—why Love worked in him  
' To gaze—his heart unchanged—upon another.'  
Tell her:—' My Lady with such constant faith  
' His heart is set  
' That every thought prompts him to do you service.  
' Yours was he early, never hath gone astray'.  
If she believes thee not,  
Tell her to ask of Love if it be true.  
And at the end make her a humble prayer—  
If she abhor to pardon me  
Let her by emissary decree I die.  
It will be seen her servant shall obey.  
Before thou art dismissed,

# THE TRUE DEFENCE

Bid Love, of every kind of Pity key—  
 (He'll know how best to show her my good cause)—  
 ' By grace of my sweet harmony  
 ' Do thou stay here with her,  
 ' And of thy servant say thou what thou wilt '.  
 And if she pardon him at thy entreaty  
 See that with gracious mien she seal his peace.

My gracious Ballad whensoever thou wilt  
 Go forth in such wise thou mayest honour get.

(1) In the  
 third part I  
 dismiss it to  
 go where it  
 will,  
 commending  
 its sweet  
 motion to the  
 arms of  
 Fortune.

A noteworthy feature of this Ballad is the declaration that he is ready to die for his loyalty to the new Defence. To believe the words sincere adds immeasurably to the force of this beautiful plea for reconciliation. My Lady Pietà stands here as often for the Catholic Church of Rome, the image of his youthful veneration. A quite genuine dread that his life, like that of others his friends, may be required of him in witness of his fidelity to truth makes itself felt here and elsewhere in the *New Life*. Literally accepted, the notion of his Lady love despatching a messenger to him to demand his life as a token of his devotion to her robs the Ballad of verisimilitude and adds an over-emphasis out of keeping with its restraint. But if the reader transports himself in imagination to a state of society in which the emissary of the Church was a dreaded visitor, who might bear away his victim to a fate never perhaps revealed to his friends, the poignancy of the lines is exposed:

' If she abhor to pardon me  
 ' Let her by messenger decree I die.'

In no case would there be surrender.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE WEDDING FEAST

A REMARKABLE ALTERATION now took place in the intellectual life of Dante, one which involved the transformation of his entire outlook. The successive stages of experience through which his mind was passing appear to have been linked, though in obscure fashion, with incidents affecting the maiden whom he loved. Every circumstance in the life of his early love which seemed to withdraw her further from his ken roused in him a poignant emotion, not dissimilar in degree from that which marked his sense of the gradual withdrawal of his mind from the Catholic Church in its existing form. Both the one and the other were, it seemed, fated to be parted from him. The consciousness of alienation deepened.

It is possible from the dubious words of verse and prose to gather some notion of the way in which he was affected by a disturbance of the two phases of deep devotion; his secret and absorbing love for the maiden dedicated to God; his mystic adoration of Divine Reality in the Eucharistic Miracle. Each of these strangely divine passions was linked with the sense of Beatitude. Each, touched by fatality, was destined to pass out of his life. We see Beatrice, already by artful calumny estranged, passing him with unseeing eye. We watch her at the marriage feast which marked, maybe, her final renunciation of the world, in the house of her Bridegroom, Christ; we behold her faithful servitor deluded in this last glimpse of her by those who surrounded her. We witness the anguish by which henceforth all attempt to come into her presence was baffled, until at length a touch of something akin to hostility in her was made apparent to the Lover. It seems hardly possible to get any certain grasp of the actual facts so slightly indicated, so purposely veiled as in a dream.

But in seeking for the underlying meaning we are on surer ground. For Dante was passing through an intellectual crisis, of which we have abundant illustrations in the history of his own times and that of succeeding centuries, during

## THE WEDDING FEAST

which free thought battled against dogma, ignorantly taught, cruelly enforced. Under the veil of this unearthly amour we get a perception of a Sacrament profaned, a worshipper spurned and unsatisfied. We are made partaker in his heart-searching doubts. A mind recoiling from a once-cherished belief, still yearning for reconciliation between this and a new vision of truth, is laid bare. Implacable hostility from some unnamed source begins to make itself apparent. Danger and death flash with sudden lurid glare across the stanzas which hymn the Beloved. With every line the suspense deepens.

‘After the above vision, when I had already said the words Love had directed me to say, many and diverse thoughts began to strive and tempt me, each as it were irresistibly. And when I thought it out with desire to find a road common to all, that is where all might agree, this was the road most hostile to me, that is, to invoke and surrender myself to the arms of Piety.’

In the ensuing Sonnets we find a guarded indication of the conflict which arose between the orthodox Church as endeared to him by long familiarity and the new Gospel of Love.

### TUTTI LI MIEI PENSIER PARLAN D'AMORE

Sonnet 6.

My thoughts are one and all speaking of Love  
And hold so great diversity within  
That one makes me to long for Love's dominion;  
Another argues madness is its power;  
Another full of hope brings me delight;  
Another many times draws me to weep.

They all agree to call on Piety,  
Yet tremble with the dread within my heart.

Hence I know not from which to draw my theme;  
I fain would speak but know not what to say;  
Thus I am found in Love's bewilderment.  
And if I'd made them all agree in one  
Needs must I then invoke my enemy—  
Madonna Piety that she defend me.

(1) In the first part I say and propound that all my thoughts are of Love.

(2) In the second I say they differ from each other, and I describe their diversity.

(3) In the third I say in what they all seem to agree.

(4) In the fourth I say

that when I wish to discourse of Love I know not whence to draw my argument. And should I wish to draw it from them all, I must invoke my enemy, 'My Lady Piety'. I say 'My Lady' as it were in a disdainful mode of speaking.



One moment his heart was filled with a mystic sweetness in the Love of Christ constraining him. The next he was plunged into despair by the reflection that no argument, no passion of devotion, could make impression on the inflexible Lady Piety—the Church dominated by Inquisitors, which he was now coming to recognise as his enemy. The most natural step for him to take, that of pleading the case before ecclesiastics able to resolve his doubts, must prove inevitably fatal. To expose his dilemma, to show, as he was prepared to do, the catholicity and true accord with the Scripture and with the Apostolic Fathers of the doctrines of Love, this was the bold and honourable course. But he knew better than to invoke my Lady Piety, her whom he called 'My Lady—as it were in a manner of disdain'. She was obdurate, inaccessible. That way lay despair.

Let no one think that the dread which makes itself felt in the *New Life* at every turn was a mere *façon de parler*. The persecution launched against the Spirituals was deliberately planned to arouse terror. Many of the victims were men of saintly life. The methods pursued were outrageous even for those days.<sup>1</sup>

Section xiv.  
The Marriage Feast.

Dante was now on the verge of rejecting what he had hitherto believed to be an essential part of the Christian faith. The manner in which he became definitely aware that he no longer held the doctrine of Transubstantiation as then taught is recounted in '*dubiose parole*', obscure words. He tells how he was invited by a friendly person to be present at a wedding. This person was in his confidence, 'by reason that he had stood by a friend of his to the extremity of life'; a phrase which suggests that he had given the highest and most perilous pledge of fidelity to his friend in fortifying him by his presence at the stake.

Unknown to Dante beforehand, Beatrice was present, and in the midst of the ceremonies he became acutely aware, on a sudden, that those who surrounded her were

<sup>1</sup> Ponce de Buontugato had refused to give up writings, banned by the authorities, which presumably he had hidden in some safe place. He was chained down to the ground in a subterranean dungeon and fastened cruelly to the wall. Bread of affliction with scant allowance of water ensured the continuance of his torture. And thus, horribly contorted, devoured by vermin in the filth of the cell, he awaited death 'with joyous soul, inflamed with Love'. The very gaolers bore witness to his fellow-disciples of his radiant faith. Men listened with awe and trembled.

*deluding* him about her—or as it is often rendered, ‘mocking him’.

‘And the truth is that they were assembled there in the company of a noble Lady who had been married that same day. And hence, according to the custom of the aforesaid city, it behoved them to bear her company in her first sitting at table in the mansion of her new Spouse. Thus, thinking to do pleasure to this friend, I intended to stay in his company at the service of the ladies. In the end of my resolution I seemed to feel a wondrous tremor beginning on the left side of my breast, and spreading suddenly over all parts of my body. I say then that I leaned my person in dissimulation on a painting which surrounded the mansion. And fearing lest any might be aware of my tremor, I raised my eyes and beholding the ladies I saw among them the most noble Beatrice.’

This ‘marriage feast’, solemnised in great publicity, has all the marks of a religious celebration. We venture to suggest that the bride was one in the act of taking the final vows before assuming the religious habit. The marriage of the nun to Christ the Bridegroom was celebrated in many particulars like an actual wedding. The bride was at first arrayed in white wedding garments which she exchanged for the habit when the vows were taken and she received a wedding ring which never left her finger and was buried with her. The Holy Eucharist was the wedding feast.

From the more than common emotion experienced by Dante on this occasion many have been led to surmise that he was recounting what took place at the marriage of Beatrice Portinari. Good reason has already been shown for rejecting the Beatrice Portinari legend. This does not lessen the probability that the lady who on this occasion became the Bride of Christ was in truth Dante’s earthly love. This may well have occasioned the anguish he experienced in the ‘*transformation*’ of his religious belief. Not only, we may conjecture, would this change of outlook continually recur to him in the light of an infidelity, but it would rouse in him a vivid sense of her horror should she become aware of his new opinions. Since the idea of the invisible Beatrice became fused with that of his early love, the agonising fear of being regarded as an outcast was doubled.

One full sight of Beatrice, one moment of Beatitude, the last recorded, save in vision, was vouchsafed to him. A tremor seized him as of old—the effort of rallying the intellectual forces to that entire abstraction which precluded the condition known as rapture was almost wholly mental—but it had its effect on the physical being, and probably on the outward appearance. He leaned his whole person ‘in dissimulation’ against a painting which surrounded the hall or chapel.

‘Then were my spirits so destroyed by the force which Love assumed on beholding the close proximity of that most noble Lady that naught but the spirits of sight remained me in life; and even these were left outside their organs, because Love insisted on taking their most noble place in order to see the wondrous Lady. And although I was other than I had been formerly, I grieved much for these little spirits which loudly lamented and said: “If he had not dazzled us out of our place we could have stayed to behold the miracle of this Lady even as the others like to ourselves do”.’

The little spirits of the eyes would seem to stand for faith, since it is through the eyes that truth is made manifest. By these spirits or channels of belief Dante had been wont to behold in the Blessed Sacrament the Body of the Lord, to which the spirits of the ears bore witness. But he was now no longer what he had formerly been. His countenance had changed, and a strange conflict ensued between Faith and Love. The new doctrine of *Love* stepped into the place once occupied by his beliefs. Love cast them forth with power, and, even as Dante bowed to the new dominion, he was penetrated with a longing for the old tranquil belief through which he had so often beheld ‘the Miracle of this “Lady”’.

It seems to be clearly indicated that Dante’s demeanour was altered to such an extent as to excite observation, and that he was being closely watched. The alteration in his appearance was an index to the alteration in his thoughts. He was transfigured, or rather *transformed*, for the signification of ‘glorified’ which is usually attached to the word *transfigured* is derived from its use in St. Mark ix, 2, and is not inherent in the Latin.<sup>1</sup> His change of countenance or

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rom. xii, 2. ‘Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind’. The Vulgate has it: ‘Nolite conformari

outlook is emphasised in the preceding Ballad and in Sonnets 7, 8 and 9.

'I say that many of these Ladies, becoming aware of my transformation, began to marvel, and in speaking they were deluding me with this most noble one. Thereupon my friend, in all good faith deceived, becoming aware of this took me by the hand and withdrawing me from the sight of these Ladies asked me what was the matter. Then when I was somewhat calmed and my dead spirits revived and they that were cast out returned into possession, I said to my friend these words: "I have set my feet in that part of life beyond which one may not further go with intent to turn back". And parting from him I turned back to my chamber of tears, and there, weeping and full of shame, I said within myself: "If this Lady knew my condition, I do not believe she would thus delude my person; verily I believe she would have great compassion of it". And as I wept, I had a mind to write words in which addressing her I might explain the cause of my transformation . . . .'

Whatever hope he may have previously cherished that the new Gospel of Divine Love might be found in accord with orthodox doctrine had vanished. He had been irresistibly impelled to pass the boundary beyond which there could lie no return. He was self-exposed in this moment a dissident from orthodox doctrine—in the eyes of Churchmen, a heretic. In the last line of the Sonnet, which sums up the experience here related, he lets the horror which lay at the back of his mind escape like a thunderclap: 'the wails of tortured excommunicates'.

The groans of pious men tortured and thrust out to die in the wilderness rang in his ears. With them he felt himself already numbered.

In the subtle use of the word *Gabbare* lies the kernel of this remarkable chapter and the succeeding sonnets. The word is usually rendered as 'to mock at', and we are asked to believe that Beatrice, observing Dante's emotion in her presence, made an open jest of it with her friends. Pictures have been painted depicting the jeers of the gay company, with

huic saeculo : sed reformamini in novitate sensuum vestri'. It would seem by the stress he lays on his changed 'senses' that Dante had this verse in mind.

Beatrice in their midst beholding the sorrowful countenance of the poet. We venture to maintain that this literal theory of an incident which caused Dante much anguish is not merely obnoxious, but (in view of all that has gone before about Beatrice) absolutely untenable. The more usual meaning of the word 'Gabbare',<sup>1</sup> is 'to deceive' or 'to delude', to make out that the thing presented is other than it really is. It is only indirectly and rarely that 'Gabbare' can be traced in any writer previous to Dante in the signification of 'to mock'. What, then, is the conclusion to which this incident leads? It points to a sudden realisation on the part of Dante that the claim of the priest, to transmute the natural elements of Bread and Wine in the Holy Sacrament in such a way that no trace of the original bread and wine remained, was a deception.

Sonnet 7.

COLL' ALTRE DONNE MIA VISTA GABBATE

With other ladies you delude my sight,  
 Nor think you, Lady, how it comes about  
 That I present so new an aspect towards you,  
 When I behold your beauty.  
 Did you but know, then Piety could hold  
 No more against me her accustomed proof;  
 For Love, when I am found so close to you,  
 Assumes authority with such confidence  
 He smites upon my wavering beliefs,  
 And one he kills, another banishes,  
 So that alone *he* stays to gaze on you.  
 Thus to the aspect of another I change.  
 But not so that I do not hear full well  
*The wails of tortured excommunicates.*

Note to  
 Sonnet 7.

<sup>1</sup> Among the words wherein the occasion of this sonnet is set forth there are certain dubious words, for instance, when I say Love slays all my sensitive spirits and the visual spirits remain alive, save that they are outside their organs. And this doubt it is impossible to solve for any who are not faithful servitors of Love in like degree. And for such what would solve the dubious words is already manifest. And so it would not be well to clear up this mystery; since my

<sup>1</sup> *Vocabolario dell' Accademia della Crusca*. Art. 'Gabbare'.

words would either fail to reach their mark or would be superfluous.'

At the point now reached Dante had become definitely perturbed and filled with doubt about Madonna. Her presence conveyed to him an unendurable sense of being deceived or mocked. He withdrew from every possible contact with her. He was aware of a disapproval centring round her, but was wholly unable to make amends. Love dominated him, but Love withheld him from beholding her. The Sonnets which reveal this dark quality of Love are three in number—7, 8 and 9. Ostensibly they were addressed to his Lady; but in Chapter xvii he lets it be understood that they were composed in order to present a nearly complete record of what was passing secretly in his mind. They reflect gloomy thoughts which discredited all his early aspirations after God, painful misgivings about the Mass, unworthily celebrated before unworthy worshippers. Recoiling with indignation from profanation of the Holy Eucharist, Dante would seem to have passed through a phase akin to that which moved some early reformers to regard the Mass as a core round which centred the abuses of a corrupt Church. Under this aspect it became a figure for a harsh ecclesiastical system, and he could hail his Lady as 'my Lady Piety', 'my Lady, as it were in a disdainful way of speaking'. Without mention of this aspect of his 'transformation' his apologia would have been incomplete. He spared himself the recital of no wound inflicted upon him in the conflict. In these Sonnets he sounded the lowest depth of disillusionment he was to reach before he set his feet on the ascending ladder.

The Sonnet opens startlingly. We conceive the Beatrice whom he addresses to stand for the Church personified in its highest rite, deeply revered as ever, yet so presented as a literal miracle, by priests without faith, as to impose on the credulity of the people.<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible to follow Dante along this narrow path between the precipice of blind acceptance of what he found incredible and utter unbelief, without the risk of causing pain to devout souls. Yet more knowledge of popular

<sup>1</sup> The language used finds a curious parallel in the words of the devout Ridley, 'They give the people with much solemn *disguising* a thing which they call their Mass, but indeed and in truth, it is a very masking and mockery of the true Supper of the Lord'.

religion in the thirteenth century should suffice to expose the fact that his revolt was not against such a sublimated or transcendental doctrine of Transubstantiation as is found in the Fathers of the Church. It was against a crafty and commercial dogmatism assimilating in character to that which marks such 'miracles' as that of St. Januarius. Of the grossly literal language of these ages there is abundant evidence which is perhaps better left undisturbed. It peeps through the satire of Chaucer; it is embedded in all good faith in secular chronicles and in monastic records; it was forced down the throats of all under horrible penalties; it was practised as a rich source of gain by some most impudent because incredulous officers of the Church; it revolted many whose profession depended on it.<sup>1</sup>

The absorbing interest in the *New Life* is its exposition of a devout man's thoughts about the Mass in an age when abuses were the more keenly felt because comparatively recently introduced, and when the Papal Curia, reinforced by foreign troops, found itself able to repress free speculation by new and awful methods.

The succeeding Sonnets are a continuation of the same theme. They depict the warring movement of the mind in presence of the Divine Sacrament. Though it be joy most beautiful, Love warns him that for him it spells the destruction of the intellect. The echo of 'Die, die', rings in his ears even at the highest moment of ecstasy. Deluding (*il Gabbo*) slays all that reverent awe with which he had been wont to approach the source of his Beatitude.

In Sonnet 8 he recounts the compelling power of that new aspect of love which now dominated him. It betrays even more clearly than the last that Love is now opposed to Piety, and is drawing Dante irresistibly away from the doctrines he has hitherto blindly held.

Section xv.  
Sonnet 8.

(1) I tell the  
cause why I  
hold back  
from coming  
to this Lady.

(2) I tell what  
happens to  
me when I  
approach her  
... what  
Love coun-  
selled by  
Reason says  
when I am  
near her.

CIÒ, CHE M'INCONTRA NELLA MENTE, MORE

That which within my mind encounters me  
Dies when I come to see you, beauteous joy.

When I am nigh to you, I'm ware of Love,  
Who saith: ' If thou dost dread destruction—flee '.

<sup>1</sup> A few years later Wyclif found many of the priests with whom he conversed frankly sceptical about the miracle of the Mass they professed to work.

## THE WEDDING FEAST

My face reveals the feigning of my heart,  
Which half unconscious seeks, where it may, support.

And through the intoxication of great dread  
The very stones seem clamouring: ' Die, die '.

Who sees me then is guilty of a sin  
Should he not comfort my amazed soul,  
Only displaying that he grieves for me,

By Piety, which your deluding kills,  
The Piety which has its origin  
In th' extinguished sight of eyes which long for Death.

I say why one ought to have Pity, that is for the pious sight which comes into my eyes, which pious sight is destroyed—that is, it appears not to the others—because of the Deluding of this Lady, who draws to her same working those who would otherwise perchance behold this Pity.

I make known the state of my heart as exposed in my face.  
I say how all sense of security fails me.  
I say that he sins who shows me no compassion so that he might become comfort to me.

### SPESSE FIATE VENEMI ALLA MENTE

This sonnet is divided into four parts, inasmuch as four things are narrated in it.

There cometh many times into my mind  
The quality obscure Love sheds on me;  
And pity of it comes to me so oft,  
' Alas ', I say, ' doth this befall none other? '

For Love assails me with a sudden force,  
So that my life nearly abandons me:  
One spirit solely rests in me alive  
This stays because it speaks to me of you.

Then I constrained me, longing to get aid,  
And thus in pale dismay, devoid of valour,  
I come to see you, thinking to be healed.

And when I raise my eyes that I may gaze,  
There starts within my heart a cataclysm  
That drives my very soul from out my pulse.

Section xvi.  
Sonnet 9.  
The first is that many times I grieved when memory moved my fancy to imagine what Love had made of me.  
The second is that Love many times assailed me so powerfully that there remained in me no sign of life save a thought which spoke of this Lady.  
The third is that when this battle of Love con-

tended thus in me, I started off, all discoloured as it were, to see this Lady, believing the sight of her would defend me from this battle, forgetting what had happened to me through approaching her great nobility. The fourth is how such sight not only did not defend me but finally discomfited the little remnant of my life.



## CHAPTER IX

### THE INTERROGATION AND THE ODE

EVER SINCE his discomfiture at the wedding feast, on which occasion we are led to surmise that he made a sudden exit, overpowered by his feelings, Dante had been torn between his longing for the old tranquil belief in the Miracle and the dread of approaching it. His perplexities centred round his inability to account for the movements of his own heart. And he constantly debated with himself in what manner he should express his feelings, assuming that he were free to make use of all his faculties to this end. If interrogated, what answer could he make?

It is indicated with some precision that an interrogation actually took place—and the train of contradictory thoughts set stirring in his mind crystallised thereupon into the beautiful song which we venture to hail as his Ode to the Blessed Sacrament. It contains many traces of the spirit of ardent desire, deep humility and entire self-surrender conspicuous in the Eucharistic prayers and hymns of St. Thomas, St. Bonaventura and Ramon Lull. The Song is preceded by an episode which suggests that Dante was in close touch with the monks when he composed it. Perhaps only members of a religious order would in that day be capable of comprehending either the rapture of mystic devotion which possessed Dante in the presence of the Holy Eucharist, or the painful mental conflict involved in the 'transformation' of his mind.

We learn that many of the noble souls alluded to as 'Ladies' had guessed his secret or part of it, but were not by any means hostile to him on this account. Olivi's doctrines had taken a deep hold among the Franciscans.

The new theme, he tells us, was 'delightful to hear'.

Section xviii. 'Since many persons had guessed the secret of my heart from my appearance, certain ladies who were assembled for the pleasure of company with one another knew my heart well because each one of them had been present at many of

my discomfitures. And coming near to them, as though by chance, I was summoned by one of these noble ladies, and she who summoned me was a lady of distinguished speech. So that when I came before them and saw distinctly that my most noble lady was not among them, taking courage I saluted them and asked their pleasure.'

The narrative passes on to describe a company assembled, so it would seem, for the purpose of interrogating the author of the above 'dark' sonnets in respect of the opinions therein expressed. It would seem that they considered he was drifting into danger, and had summoned a little meeting to examine him. It was, however, no formal interrogatory. Though prepared beforehand it was arranged that it should take place 'as though by chance'. The Superior who summoned Dante was a man of distinction and eloquence—'donna di molto leggiadro parlare'—and he was supported by other dignitaries.

Some showed marks of great satisfaction. Others waited in grave silence. A few were whispering together how best to frame the interrogatory. In the end and in accordance with custom Dante was questioned on a matter not of faith, but of practice. He had begun to avoid the presence of his Lady; how was this consistent, he was asked, with the deep reverence he professed for the Blessed One? Assuredly Love shown in so compromising a manner might lead to unheard-of results. Dante's answer furnished a concise summary of the preceding chapters of the *New Life*. Formerly the Lady's Salutation (i.e. the rapture he experienced in the Holy Eucharist) had constituted the joy of his soul. Because this, for reasons into which he did not enter, was no longer vouchsafed to him, he had set the joy of his soul in 'that which cannot fail', that is, it may be surmised, in the promises of Christ.

This declaration occasioned something of a sensation. A general murmur began during which sighs arose among the company. Possibly many had experienced the same deprivation. Finally the Superior, under whose authority he had obeyed the summons, demanded:—'We pray you tell us in what doth this thy Beatitude consist?' To which he replied: 'In those words which set forth the praises of my Lady'.

Whereupon with evident intention of reproof the Superior announced the judgment of the company:—'If thou hadst

spoken truly to us, thou shouldest have fashioned in other guise those words which thou hast said in explaining thy condition to us'. And Dante retired from them, reflecting not without shame on the rebuke he had received.

If Dante were speaking solely of a living maiden whose identity none had been allowed to guess, among a company of other ladies, it is hard to conjecture exactly what he meant when he first said that his sole joy in life consisted in what could never fail him, and that this joy lay in the words which set forth the praises of his Lady. We are brought up against a note of exaggeration out of keeping with the grave simplicity of the narrative. The praises of his Lady to which he makes allusion as of such surpassing consolation were not his own songs—so much is clear. And it is not usual for lovers to rely on the utterances of their rivals to bring them to Beatitude.

But if we conceive of Dante in doubt and distress at having lost his early fervour in the Eucharist, if we can see him more and more deeply penetrated with dismay at the magical note which by unwise secrecy had stolen into the Mass, at the lack of faith only too evident in celebrant and worshipper alike, then it is possible to understand how he came to forsake a profaned rite and find all his comfort in the words of Christ Himself. Those whom he addressed must have known perfectly what he meant when he said that his Beatitude consisted in what could never fail. But they pressed him further. What special words of Christ were those which brought him this unspeakable consolation? And in declaring that they were the words which set out the praises of his Lady, the joys of union with Christ, he opened up as it were the very chapter and verse in St. John's Gospel which elucidated the Divine mystery: 'He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood dwelleth in me and I in him'. 'As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven. . . . he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.' For the mystic passage is illuminated by the succeeding words, added for disciples who had failed to grasp His meaning: 'It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: *the words that I have spoken unto you, they are spirit, and they are life*'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> St. John, vi, 63. Spiritus est qui vivificat: caro non prodest quidquam: verba quae ego locutus sum vobis, spiritus et vita sunt.

At this point he turned resolutely from the facile path of denouncing errors to the task of rehearsing for the unlearned in their own tongue the glory of the most holy rite. Penetrated with a consciousness that he had undertaken too exalted a subject, he dared not begin, and waited several days divided between desire to speak and fear of beginning.

'It so happened thereupon that passing along a road by which there ran an exceeding clear stream my will was so strongly moved to utterance that I began to think out the mode I should use. And I thought it would not be fit to put things concerning her into speech save in addressing 'souls' in the second person, and not every 'soul' but only such as are noble and not merely 'feminine'. Whereupon I declared that my tongue spoke, moved as it were of itself, and said: '*Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*'. These words I treasured in my mind with great joy, proposing to take them for my beginning so that when I had returned to the afore-said city and had reflected for several days I began my Ode with this beginning, arranged after a fashion which will appear below in its divisions.'

The glimpse here afforded of the solitary rambles which precluded the composition of this famous Ode is of high autobiographical interest, displaying as it does the open-air sources of his inspiration and the extent to which the book of Nature spoke to him in parables. The clear river figuring the living water of Holy Scripture has before entered into the narrative, and suggests that it was on the words of Christ Himself that his meditations were based.

## DONNE, CH' AVETE INTELLETTO D'AMORE

Ode i.

## I. PRELUDE.

I say to whom  
I would speak  
of my Lady  
and why I  
would speak.

I say what  
her glory ap-  
pears to me  
myself when I  
think of it and  
how I would  
speak of it if I  
lost not dar-  
ing.

Ye who are noble, understanding Love,  
With you I would discourse about Madonna;  
I may not hope to sum up all her praises,  
Only by reasoning to relieve my mind.

I say that when I think upon her might  
Love makes himself so sweetly felt in me  
That did I not lose daring to declare it  
I would fill all the world with love for her.

I say how I  
think to  
speak so that  
I may not lose  
boldness.

I would not speak in too exalted mode  
Lest I become contemptible through fear;  
But in regard to her high state I'll treat  
Respecting her with all simplicity

Again repeat-  
ing to whom  
I mean to  
speak I say  
the reason why I speak to them.

To you souls filled with love both young and old;  
This is no theme to talk of with the rest.

## II. THE SUBJECT—MADONNA.

I say what is  
understood of  
her in  
Heaven.

An Angel in Divine Intelligence  
Calls saying: ' Sire, a Miracle is seen  
' Within the world in action; it proceeds  
' From out a Soul; shines far as here on high.  
' No other lack hath Heaven but to possess  
' This Miracle; and craves it from the Lord '.  
Every saint implores this grace of Him,  
While Piety alone defends our cause.  
God speaks and indicates Madonna:—  
' Beloved mine, in peace now let your Hope  
' Stay there so long as pleaseth Me, the while  
' But one there be who doth await her loss—  
' One in the lower region who will say:—  
' " O reprobates, I saw the blest ones' Hope " '.

I say what is  
understood of  
her on earth  
so far as con-  
cerns the  
nobility of her  
soul narrating  
somewhat of  
virtues which  
proceed from  
her.

Madonna is desired in the high Heaven;  
Now would I make you know of her Virtù.  
Ye who would have I say a noble mien,  
Frequent her presence. When she passeth by  
Love casts a chill into base-natured hearts,  
Through which their every thought congeals and  
dies.

He who should bear to stand and gaze on her  
Must turn to noble thing—or die outright.  
When one be found worthy to gaze on her  
He tests her quality, for it befalls  
She grants him her Salvation, renders him  
So lowly he forgets every offence.  
Finally God for greater grace hath given—  
None can end ill who once hath talked with her.

## THE INTERROGATION AND THE ODE

Love saith of her: 'How can a mortal thing  
 'Be thus embellished and so free from stain?'  
 Then looking on her in himself he swears  
 'God means *some new thing* to create in her'.  
 She hath a lustré as of pearls; in mode  
 Such as befits the soul nor passeth bounds.  
 She is the highest good nature can make.  
 By her ensample beauty tests herself.

From out her eyes, whene'er she moveth them,  
 There issue spirits of inflaming Love;  
 They pierce the intellect of him that looks  
 And then pass on so that each finds the heart.

You see love in her, painted in the smile  
 Where no one steadfastly can gaze on her.

I say what is understood of her on earth so far as regards the nobility of her body and telling of certain beauties which belong to her whole person.

I tell of the eyes that are the beginning of love.

I tell of the mouth<sup>1</sup> which is the goal of love.

And that

every vicious thought be abandoned, let him who reads remember that it is written above that the Salvation of this lady, which was of the movement of her mouth, was the goal of my desire while I was able to receive it.

### III. THE HAND-MAID (*Envoi*).

My Ode, I know that thou wilt go discoursing  
 To many souls when I have put thee forth;  
 I warn thee now since I have raised thee up  
 As a young child of love, and of plain speech,  
 Where'er thou penetrate, beseeching pray:  
 'Assist me to go farther, for I am sent  
 'To her with whose high praise I am adorned'.  
 And if thou would'st not void of profit go  
 Tarry not where base people be about:  
 Contrive if thou art able, to be revealed  
 Solely to lady or to courteous man  
 Who shall escort thee by the speedy way.  
 Thou shalt find Love himself with her;  
 Commend me to him as 'tis meet to do.

I say what I desire of this Ode.

<sup>1</sup> I say truly that completely to open up the meaning of this Ode, it would be necessary to use more minute divisions. But nevertheless I am not displeased if he who hath not so much wit that he can understand it by those that have been

<sup>1</sup> *Canticles* i, 2. I . . . let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth. Cf. St. Bernard, Sermon viii, on this passage: 'That the kiss of God is the Holy Spirit.'

made should let it alone; for in truth I dread I may have communicated its meaning to too many even by these divisions I have made, if it should chance that many should hear it.<sup>2</sup>

In attempting to grasp the meaning of this poem, which Dante believed was only too simple and obvious, the first line must be shorn of disguise. 'Ladies' must be accepted for noble souls. And the word 'Love' must be understood in a very special sense. It is not the common sort which earthly lovers use towards each other. It is spiritual Love, uniting man to God. It is the new law of Love, very widely recognised in this age as the antithesis to ecclesiastical ordinances. Hence the Ode is addressed to all who have learned to understand the Gospel of Divine Love. These alone were in a position to apprehend the message of wisdom concealed for them under its cryptic diction. To these he addressed himself, not as daring to fathom the whole mystery of the Eucharist Feast, but with the hope of disentangling his own perplexities, in which doubtless they were sharers.

Pondering on the mystery of man's Redemption, which is implicit in the Holy Eucharist, and constitutes its 'valore', he was possessed, he tells us, by a passion of Love so fervent that did he but dare to proclaim the Truth aloud it must draw all men as it draws himself to the Gospel of the Divine Love. He did not dare. The forces set to stifle Truth were too overwhelming. It was possible only to touch the surface of his great theme and so to write that those already *in Love* (initiates in the new doctrine) might alone perceive his meaning.

The desire of the angels to probe the mysteries of the Christian Faith was a favourite subject with medieval theologians, suggested by the words of St. Peter, 'Which things (the Incarnation, the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow) the angels desire to look into'. From this dramatic presentment of their desire, Angels pleading with Almighty God for a vision of the Transcendent *Miracle in Act* is but a step. Angels above thirst to behold this sublime exhibition of Love and Power. Saints below implore its grace may still be theirs. There is a hint that for a short while only will it still be vouchsafed to mortals here below.

Pursuing the high theme of the *Miracle in Act* he lifts his readers to contemplate the Virtù, or inner essence of the rite

which should grace mankind with the actual Presence of God Incarnate. How would the Divine Presence be revealed?

First of all in presence of Christ the wicked would be openly confounded. Such as should endure to remain near Him would either undergo a change of heart or must perish outright. All who in any degree are worthy to adore would be led to prove or make trial of this very Virtù or Essence (Love itself). It would make them humble and gentle, oblivious of every offence that may have been committed against them. And it would set them free from fear of their enemies, for the Blessed One is their pledge that none shall harm them.

Love hesitates; wonders doubtfully:—‘How can any Mortal thing be so lovely and so pure?’ The corporeal transmutation insisted upon to enhance the miracle repelled the devout. To such, intent in contemplation, there comes a swift intuition that God intends to transmute this rite, so horribly profaned by avarice, to a New Thing.

In the doctrine of the Joachists the Holy Eucharist was to be superseded in the coming Age of the Spirit by a new and spiritual splendour, of which the Blessed Gift in the Age of the Son was the pledge and forerunner. Love and Love alone was able to discern the spiritual glory of the rite. Through the EYES, intuitive perceptions of Truth and the SMILE, rapt assurance of Salvation, the Holy Eucharist, under its highest mystic aspect, unfolded to the devout the very Gospel itself of Divine Love. Spirits of enkindled Love bringing release from all threats and penalties streamed down upon the worshipper, and filled the heart with joy.

In the *envoi* Dante proclaims his Ode a Daughter of Love, *i.e.* of the New Love. This hymn to the Blessed Sacrament was designed for the consolation and enlightenment of all who were beginning to break free from beliefs no longer acceptable. It was meant to confirm them in the aspiration for a purer ideal of worship.

The most striking feature in Dante's treatment of the controversies which divided Christendom is his rejection of invective or bitterness. He aimed at setting before the world the aspirations which filled men's hearts in the golden age of the Church. He painted in glowing colours the signs which had ever witnessed to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It was the absence of such signs which should



awake in men the knowledge that Christ now visited His flock but rarely—might soon visit them no longer.

Solely by the unmistakable fruits of Love in the worshippers could this holy Presence be recognised. Love, then, is the key to the mystery.

The esoteric sense attached to Love was becoming more evident as the narrative proceeded. It was time, not to elucidate its meaning, that was impossible, but to acknowledge and lay stress on its cryptic quality.

## Section xxx.

'After this Ode had been put about among people to some extent, so that a certain friend heard it, a desire moved him to beg me to declare what Love is, having perchance through the words he had heard, hope of me beyond measure. Whereupon thinking that after such a composition it was seemly to treat somewhat of Love, and thinking that my friend ought to be served, I proposed to say words in which I should treat of Love and I composed this Sonnet:—'

## Sonnet 10.

I speak of  
Love as exist-  
ing in poten-  
tiality.

(1) I say in  
what subject  
this poten-  
tiality resides.

(2) I say how  
this subject  
and this  
potentiality  
are brought  
into being  
and how the  
one is related  
to the other as  
form is to  
matter.

I speak of  
Love as it is  
developed  
from poten-  
tiality into  
actuality;  
how it is  
developed in  
man.

How it is de-  
veloped in  
woman.

## AMORE E COR GENTILE SONO UNA COSA

Love and the noble heart are one same thing,  
As the wise man declareth in his rhyme;  
Thus one without the other dare exist  
No more than rational soul bereft of reason.

Nature creates them when in tender mood;  
Love for the Sire, the heart for his abode,  
Within which slumbering he takes his rest  
For a brief season maybe or for long.

Then in the noble soul beauty appears,  
Which charms the eyes, until within the heart  
Is born a yearning for the thing that charms.

Within the heart often it stays so long  
The spirit of Love out of his sleep will start.  
This way the valiant man stirs Love in woman.

Hard upon this veiled hymn to the Holy Spirit follows one in which Dante demonstrated how through the Holy Eucharist the spirit of Love may be aroused, 'and how it may not only be awakened where it sleeps, but also where it exists not, even potentially, this by its marvellous working brings it forth'.

# THE INTERROGATION AND THE ODE

NEGLI OCCHI PORTA LA MIA DONNA AMORE

Madonna carries Love within her eyes;  
She makes all noble when she deigns to gaze;

And where she passeth all men turn to her;  
He trembles in his heart whom she salutes,  
So that abasing him his face turns pale,  
And bitterly he laments his every fault.  
Anger and pride are put to flight before her.

(Aid me, ye noble, so I may honour her.)

All consolation, every humble thought  
Arises in his heart who hears her speak;  
Hence who hath once beheld her is approved.

The look she hath when she a little smiles  
Cannot be said nor holden in the mind,  
'Tis such a rare and noble miracle.

What she then effects miraculously in their hearts: Here is a little section which asks help as it were for the previous section and that which follows:—I show to whom it is my intention to speak, calling 'Ladies' to help me to honour her. I say how in respect of that most noble part her mouth she turns this power into act. (1) in respect of her most consoling speech; (2) in respect of her miraculous smile—save that I say not of this last how it operates upon the hearts because memory cannot retain this smile nor its effects.

The above sonnet, like the preceding one, owes much to Guido Guinicelli. Like the Canzone it dwells much on the eyes of Beatrice, demonstrations of truth to all who fix the eyes of faith on the promises of Christ. From Beatrice comes also the smile or persuasive sweetness of interior joy which passes understanding or power of memory to recall.

Guido had written:

She passeth by her way so sweetly habited  
That she makes pride to flee in all she greets:  
*He errs from our true faith if he believe her not.*<sup>1</sup>  
No man may dare approach if he be base.

<sup>1</sup> When for Lucia, Star of Love, he understood the new Gospel of the early reformers, a new splendour descends upon this verse of Guido Guinicelli, illuminating each image and revealing the essentially sacred character of his muse.

The Star-beam lights the wave—  
Heaven holds the Star and the Star's radiance.

Sonnet 11.

I say how this  
Lady turns  
this power  
into act in re-  
spect of that  
most noble  
part—her  
eyes.  
How by her  
virtù she en-  
nobles what  
she sees,  
which is as  
much as to  
say she brings  
Love in  
power thither  
where he is  
not;  
How she  
brings Love  
in act into  
the hearts of  
all those she  
sees:

## THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

This is the constant refrain of the New Style poets, the lesson most needed by a generation void of faith and reverence. He who would learn whether the rare and noble Miracle were still vouchsafed to the Church must watch for its unmistakable signs among the worshippers. Is the spirit of gentleness and humility apparent among them? Have pride and anger disappeared?

## CHAPTER X

### SHADOWS OF APPROACHING DOOM

THE SCENE passes to recount the grief of Beatrice on the occasion of her father's death. Dante relates that, placing himself in the vestibule of her chamber, he overheard the comments on her pitiful access of grief and himself excited much surprise by betraying the extent to which it affected him. He throws the comments on Beatrice and on himself into the form of two Sonnets.

The opening passage is very carefully constructed to admit of a double meaning:

'Not many days after this, as it pleased that glorious Lord Who did not deny death to Himself, He Who was Progenitor of so great a marvel as that most noble Beatrice was seen to be, passing from this life to eternal Glory, departed thither in all reality.' Section xxii.

The Progenitor of Beatrice in her mystic sense, whether as the Blessed Sacrament or as the Spiritual Church in which this mystery had been enshrined, could be none other than the Second Person of the Trinity. Human relationships are but types of the Divine, and Dante did not scruple to apply the word 'Daughter' in the sense of Divine emanation to the Holy Eucharist as to the Unction of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Bearing in mind the nature of the 'Lady' whom he adored, it is possible to read between the lines of the encomium:

'Since there is no friendship so intimate as that of a good father with a good child and that of a good child with a good father, and this Lady had been of the highest degree of goodness, and her father, as is believed by many, and is true, had been good in high degree, it is manifest that this Lady was filled with bitterest grief.'

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, 16. 'The Lady was the most fair and noble Daughter of the Emperor of the Universe',

May it not be inferred from the circumstances to which Dante obscurely alludes that the occasion to which he referred was a shadowy reminiscence of the ceremonies which celebrated the hours of the Crucifixion on Good Friday? We seem to behold in the hidden form of Beatrice bowed with grief at the death of her Progenitor<sup>1</sup> a figure of the bereaved Church bewailing Him from Whom she had her being. The office of Tenebrae as celebrated in churches and religious houses on the eve of Good Friday was a veritable burial service. Everything was done to produce a funereal atmosphere. Fifteen candles were lighted at the office of Tenebrae on a triangle called the hearse, which was placed in the Sanctuary, to be gradually extinguished, one after each Psalm, till one alone was left and a feeling of darkness and mourning prevailed.

Mass was never said on Good Friday. After Mass on Holy Thursday the altar was stripped of its draperies, the crucifix was swathed in black, and the Reserved Sacrament was taken in procession to a tabernacle known as the Altar of Repose or Easter Sepulchre in a side chapel, where people watched and prayed all night. The words from Lamentations, which formed so conspicuous a feature in the office of Tenebrae, are found recurring throughout the *New Life* until the passing of Beatrice which they were held by the Spirituals to foreshadow.

Into the mourning of the Church for her Founder and Sire, foretold in the vision of Jeremiah, there entered a special poignancy. There were high dignitaries who by their persecutions of holy men were responsible, in the eyes of the Spirituals, for bringing about the withdrawal from the Church of the Blessed Sacrament. And we find in Dante's verses repeatedly an echo of the Lamentations:

'How doth the city sit solitary, . . . she that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces. . . She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies . . . her priests sigh, her virgins are afflicted, and she is in bitterness. . . Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow.<sup>2</sup> Mine eye runneth down with rivers of water for the

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Lamentations*, I, 1, 2, 4, 12.

## SHADOWS OF APPROACHING DOOM

destruction of the daughter of my people. Mine eye trickleth down, and ceaseth not, without any intermission.<sup>1</sup>

Many other passages could be quoted from the Psalms and Prophets which describe the mourning of the Jewish Church over the sins of her betrayers—unworthy priests and false prophets. There were not wanting many religious men at the close of the thirteenth century who believed a similar crisis of betrayal and dissolution was being enacted in the Christian Church, and appropriated the language used by sacred writers to express their own horror of existing abuses.

There is a cryptic note in the words used by Dante to describe his Lady's grief, and it was curious that he should have thrown the incident into dramatic form, in recounting it in verse, for the express reason that it was thus he would like to have addressed the Ladies personally had *no censure* rested on him:

'And as, according to the custom of the aforesaid City, ladies with ladies and men with men gather to this great mourning, many ladies gathered there where this Beatrice was piteously weeping. And I seeing some ladies turn back from her heard them say words of this most noble one, how she was lamenting. Among these words I heard them say: "In truth she weeps so that whoever should behold her would die of pity". Then these ladies passed on. And I remained in such sorrow that from time to time a tear bathed my face and I concealed myself by continually putting my hand to my eyes. And were it not that I expected to hear more about her, for I was in a place past which the greater number of the ladies went who were departing from her, I would have hidden me instantly when my tears assailed me. And as I lingered in the same place, ladies again passed close to me, speaking together and saying these words: "Which of us could ever be happy again who have heard this Lady speak so piteously?" After this, others passed by who came saying: "He who is here weeps neither more nor less than if he had beheld her even as we have". Then others said of me: "Look at him. He does not seem himself, such an one hath he become". And thus, as these ladies passed, I heard words about her and about myself after the manner that I have said'.

It is a very strange narration in several particulars. An

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 48, 49.

# THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

exaggerated note is perceptible in recounting the very natural grief of a daughter and its effect upon others. In so consummate an artist as Dante this suggests always a hint of a double meaning. And this is further stressed by Dante's account of his own behaviour, for, though he tells us he guarded with extraordinary precautions the secret of his love, he is found conspicuously watching and weeping near by the spot where Beatrice is surrendering herself to an agony of mourning, while troops of ladies pass in and out of her presence. It is certainly mysterious that the apparently trivial words which the ladies let fall should have been thought worthy to be enshrined in verse. The two sonnets add considerably to the cryptic indications already noted.

## Sonnet 12.

I call and ask  
these Ladies  
if they come  
from her, tell-  
ing them that  
I believe it is  
so because  
they return as  
it were  
ennobled.

I entreat  
them to tell  
me about her.

## VOI, CHE PORTATE LA SEMBIANZA UMILE

You that wear thus a lowly countenance  
Betraying in your downcast eyes your grief,  
Whence come you for your aspect seems to show  
You have become alike in Piety?  
Have you beheld our noble Lady's face  
All wet (on your account) with tears of Love?  
Tell it me, Ladies, for my heart tells it me,  
Beholding you go forth, having done no ill.  
And if you come from so great Piety  
Deign to stay here and pause with me awhile;  
Conceal not from me what relates to her.  
For I behold your eyes that they have wept,  
And see you come so sore disfigured  
That my heart quakes only at glimpse of it.

## SE' TU COLUI, C'HAI TRATTATO SOVENTE

## Sonnet 13.

This sonnet  
has four  
parts as the  
Ladies for  
whom I an-  
swer had four  
modes of  
reply.

Canst thou indeed be he who oft has sung  
Speaking to none but us of our dear Lady?  
Thy voice resembles his but not thy face,  
Which seems to us like that of other folk.  
Ah, why so broken-hearted dost thou weep  
As to rouse pity in others of thyself?  
Didst thou behold *her* weep that thou canst not  
Keep secret any way thine anguished mind?  
Leave tears to us and the sad faring forth  
(He commits sin who ever comforts us),  
For in her wailing we have heard her speak.

## SHADOWS OF APPROACHING DOOM

Pity she hath so manifest in her face  
That whoso would have dared to gaze on her  
Weeping before her would have fallen dead.

Thus and thus, he tells us, he *would* have spoken, had it not been for reprehension. Clearly he would have been called to account had he done so.

The many curious features in the above sonnets are consistent with the theory that Dante was here relating to a sympathetic audience the part he himself had played (and for which possibly he had suffered) in an event, notorious in the city, not long past, yet forbidden under severest penalties to be mentioned. Such an event was not infrequent in the annals of the city during the terrible persecution of the Spirituals known as the Fifth Tribulation, which marked the reign of Nicholas IV. Can it be that Dante was witness to the carrying out of a sentence against certain monks or students among his friends? Great publicity was accorded to these disciplinary measures, very usually carried out on Holy Thursday, and as a Tertiary his attendance would probably be permitted if not enforced. There are several indications that the noble souls who passed before Dante were monks excommunicated by reason of their opinions, making their final progress either to those underground dungeons in which, chained to the walls, hunger, thirst, cold and darkness awaited them, or to a banishment which must end in destitution and death.

The 'ladies' are supposed to be relating their impressions of the sorrows of Beatrice on the death of her father, which they have lately witnessed. But the words of the sonnet throw a different light on the affair. The lament of the mourning daughter of Zion was not solely for the past rejection of the Son of God. It had a poignant application to the present tribulations of the saints, through which, so the Spirituals believed, depraved ecclesiastics had 'crucified to themselves afresh the Son of God'. The secret theme is suffered to emerge cautiously. The verse seems certainly to admit of the supposition that the grief of 'our Lady' and the tears she shed were actually on behalf of the little company of noble souls, whose pitiful state aroused in Dante such deep distress.

To ponder over the sonnets in which Dante made known something of the heart-broken grief experienced by himself and other of his friends is to feel assured that this was no



transient semi-artificial emotion. It was of so overwhelming a nature as to draw tears in public from a man of proud and reserved disposition.

It may be dimly surmised that under the guise of lamenting over his Lady's sorrow, as reflected in the demeanour of those who have witnessed it, he is proffering to the excommunicates, compelled to depart from her presence, the only consolation open to them—an assurance of their communion with the most High by Whose Love they are sustained even in this hour of shame. 'I call these "Ladies" and ask whether they come from Her Presence, telling them that I verily believe that it is so because they have come back *ennobled* (ingentilite).' This word seems to be sharply contrasted with the word 'sfigurate' in the sonnet, which we have ventured to render as *disfigured*, its more usual sense, rather than *transfigured*. In declaring that his heart throbbed when he saw them come by 'sfigurate', he was surely expressing a painful emotion, and it is significant to find him commenting on the word apparently to lay stress on the fact that the little company so sorely disfigured outwardly bore unmistakable signs of the spiritual nobility conferred on them.

The second sonnet is couched in the form of a reply from the little group of excommunicates. Dante explains it is what they *would* have said had it been in their power to respond to his sympathy. The train of thought roused by the sight of the barbarous penalties inflicted on the devout by ecclesiastical authority suggested the irresistible conclusion that the Second Age was shortly to pass. The vision of Beatrice mourning in extremity of anguish, as the daughter of Zion mourned of old, leads on to the vision of Beatrice ascending to Heaven. Just as the First Age of the Father ended in bitter tribulation, so, too, according to the Apocalyptic Vision must there be anguish and persecution preceding the close of the Second Age of the Son. The Ode presents a foreboding of the approaching withdrawal of the Blessed Miracle from mankind. And it is intimately though covertly linked with a foreboding on the part of Dante that sooner or later he may be called on himself to meet the awful fate of his comrades.

'After this for some days it came to pass that a painful infirmity fell upon some part of my body whereby for nine

days consecutively I suffered most bitter punishment. This brought me to such intense weakness that I was compelled to stay as do those who are unable to move. I say that on the ninth day feeling an almost intolerable pain within me, there came to me a thought relating to my Lady. And when I had thought about her a little while I turned my thoughts back on my own enfeebled life, and beholding how slight was its power to endure, even when in full health, I began to weep within myself at so great misery. Whereon sighing deep I said within myself, "Of necessity the most noble Beatrice must one day die."

And thereat I was seized by such intense bewilderment that I closed my eyes and began to be in travail like one in delirium after this wise.'

The incidents now related followed close on those of the preceding chapter, as appears by the words 'A few days after', implying that the mind of Dante was still occupied with the events which had provoked in him and others such overpowering grief. He is in acute pain, having endured for nine consecutive days 'the most excruciating punishment' (*pena*). It is no very far-fetched conjecture that the '*amarissima pena*' may have been inflicted as penance for his openly displayed sympathy with the excommunicate brethren as recounted in the previous chapter. Flagellation, either self-inflicted or by order of superiors, was part of the regular routine of monastic life, from which nobles and kings when they sought conventual retreat were not exempt. The Franciscans beat each other habitually by way of friendship. The warning Dante put into the mouth of the mourners in the last Sonnet, 'He commits sin who tries to comfort us', seems to hint at what was to follow. Be this as it may, the intolerable anguish either of long-continued discipline or of some unnamed malady threw him into a kind of delirium which centred round two leading thoughts: 'Of necessity this most noble Beatrice is doomed to die', coupled with a vision of tortured victims announcing his own fate: 'Thou too must die, must die'. He called out in anguish, was brought back to himself by his friends, and embodied the vision in his second ode. The long narrative winds in and out like a solemn fugue in the hands of a musician, often doubling back on itself. It sets forth how Dante came to see the Vision, and what effect it had on him; what other people

# THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

thought of him, and why he felt impelled to tell them what he had seen, until when all is done the same theme is again presented, though with one or two significant alterations, in the form of a Canzone. The result of this curious circumlocution is to throw into the background the actual Vision itself and fasten attention on him who witnessed it and on those who formed his audience. But the Vision was the important thing, and it was an age in which such vivid dream-like impressions on the mind were regarded with reverent awe as manifestations from on high. They were accepted as unimpeachable evidence of truth.

Ode II.

DONNA PIETOSA E DI NOVELLA ETATE

I say, speaking to an undefined person, how I was roused from an empty phantasy by certain ladies, and how I promised to tell it to them. First I say what certain ladies and what one alone said and did on account of this phantasm before I returned to real consciousness.

I say what these ladies spoke to me after I had left this delirium.

A lady, full of pity, young in age,  
And much adorned with noble qualities,  
Who stood where I was calling oft on Death,  
Seeing my eyes were filled with piety  
And hearkening unto mine empty words,  
Began much terrified to weep aloud.  
And other ladies, who had become aware,  
From her who wept with me, of my condition  
Made her depart  
And came close round me to revive my senses.  
One said :—‘ Sleep not ; ’  
Another :—‘ Why art thou discomforted ? ’  
Thereon I cast aside  
The new imagination, calling on  
My Lady’s name.

So full of sorrow was my utterance  
And broken so by anguish and by tears  
That I alone heard in my heart her name ;  
And though my countenance was full of shame  
Which thus all openly displayed itself,  
Love made me turn to them.  
Such was my colour to behold  
It made them speak among themselves of Death.  
‘ Let us console him ’, one prayed soft the other,  
And they repeated oftentimes :  
‘ What didst thou see, that all thy valour’s gone ? ’  
And when I was a little comforted I said  
‘ Ladies, I will relate this thing to you ’.

## SHADOWS OF APPROACHING DOOM

While I was musing on my fragile life,  
 And saw how brief a time it may endure,  
 Love wept within my heart where he abides ;  
 Whereat my soul so sorely was dismayed  
 That while I sighed I said within my thoughts :  
 ' Truly my Lady's death must come to pass ' .  
 There seized upon me then such sore dismay  
 I closed my eyes, o'erwhelmed with cowardice,  
 And thus in deep bewilderment my senses  
 Went each awandering as in a dream  
 Bereft of consciousness and verity.<sup>1</sup>  
 Faces of souls in torture rose before me  
 Crying :—' Like us, thou too must die, must die ' .  
 Then saw I many things ambiguous  
 In the vain phantasy I entered on ;  
 I seemed to be I know not in what place  
 And witnessed noble souls distraught pass by,  
 Some weeping, others uttering screams,  
 For out of malice they were hurling fire.<sup>2</sup>  
 Whereon methought I saw by slow degrees  
 The Sun all darkened and the Star appear,  
 While both were weeping ;  
 Birds flying through the air to fall,  
 And the earth quaking :—  
 And a man, pallid and hoarse appeared to me  
 Saying : ' What dost thou ? Knowest thou not the news ?  
 Dead is thy Lady, she who was so fair ' .  
 I raised on high mine eyes all wet with tears,  
 And saw what seemed to me a shower of manna,  
 Angels ascending on their way to Heaven.

I say how I  
 told this  
 vision of  
 mine, first  
 relating the  
 vision in due  
 order.

<sup>1</sup> Rossetti felicitously renders these lines:

Then saw I many broken-hinted sights  
 In the uncertain state I stepped into.

<sup>2</sup> The line ' Che di tristizia saettevan foco ' has proved a stumbling-block to translators. Rossetti ignores it and gives a picture of his own:

' Where ladies through the streets like mournful lights  
 Ran with loose hair and eyes that frighten you.'

In the translation of the *Vita Nuova* given in the Temple Classics we have :

' Lamentations that shot forth fiery shafts of grief.'

We suggest that the word *tristizia* be taken in its common significance of cruelty, malignity. Taken as a mere poetic hyperbole the line is thoroughly unsatisfactory. Taken literally it has the effect of turning a lurid torchlight upon the whole scene.

A little cloud went on in front of them  
 And following it they shouted all, ' Osanna '.  
 And I would tell it you had they said more.  
 ' No more I hide it from thee ', then said Love ;  
 ' Come see our Lady how she lieth still '.  
 Fancy deceptive led me to behold  
 My Lady dead. And when I had discerned her  
 I saw good souls cover her with a veil.  
 And on her rested lowliness so deep  
 It seemed she murmured : ' Now I am in peace '.

So humble in my grief did I become  
 Seeing in her such lowliness expressed  
 I said :—' I hold thee very sweet, O Death.  
 A noble thing henceforth thou shouldest be,  
 Since thou within my Lady hast abode.  
 Pity thou shouldst nourish, not disdain.  
 Thou seest that so desirous I have come  
 To be of thine, that of like faith I am.  
 Come, for my heart invokes thee '.

I say at what  
 point they  
 awakened me  
 and thank  
 them  
 obscurely.

Then, all my sorrow quenched I went away.  
 And when I was alone,  
 Gazing towards the realm on high, I said :  
 ' Blessed, fair soul, is he that seeth thee '.  
 Then did you call me back ! I yield you thanks.

We learn from the preamble that the ' Donna Pietosa ' who waited on him was one of Dante's nearest kin. It may very well have been his step-brother Francesco, who at the time of the Vision (1289-1290 cir.) might be about fourteen. Little Tana was younger—she would seem hardly of an age to be admitted to a sick-room. The other ' Ladies ' were probably monks, inclined to the Spiritual doctrine, of which Florence was an ardent centre, and earnest believers in the Divine origin of such a vision as is now related.

There is a strong Joachist flavour about the latter part of the ' phantasy '. There is much to suggest, however, that the scene was one recently witnessed, thrust back forcibly into the subconscious regions of the mind, because too horrible to bear recalling. Now in his intense feebleness it rose up before him with all its ghastly accompaniments and roused in him a frenzy of grief and terror.

Faces of tortured souls, dishevelled, distraught, seemed to threaten him also with death ; behind them crowded fierce and cruel faces, denouncing him as dead. Then a gap in the narrative. Dante is transported he knows not whither. The noble souls pass again before him in extremity of woe, their garments in disorder as though torn by the mob. Some weep in silence. Others are uttering terrified screams. Showers of burning faggots or tow are being hurled upon them by brutalised guards or spectators. Another hiatus. What followed did not need to be recounted. The awful horror of the scene at the stake lay on all hearts like a hideous nightmare. It is implied that Dante had not shrunk from the last appalling test of friendship, that of conducting his friend to the extremity of life. We have his own word for the fact that he was an eyewitness of such a scene. For when in Purgatory he encountered the purifying flames of the Seventh Cornice, they vividly recalled to him, he tells us, ' the human bodies he had once seen burnt ',<sup>1</sup> and he shrank back oppressed with terror.

What was said and done on this occasion could not be told. It was only possible to furnish hints sufficient to enable such as had also been present to discern the hidden event. He passed, greatly daring, to proclaim the wrath of Heaven, how the Sun withdrew His light ; and the Stars appeared to weep. The birds of the air fell dead. The earth quaked. All this leads up to the climax—the voice which declares with authority that now, now the time had arrived when Beatrice will no longer grace the world with her presence. In the preamble Dante reveals that he who hoarsely with changed countenance shouted, ' Knowest thou not ? Thy wondrous Lady hath departed from this age ', was a friend of his own.

The long-disputed moment which should close the Age of the Son and mark the withdrawal of the Holy Presence from earth was then, so it seemed to Dante in his delirium, at hand. The cup of iniquity was full. The persecution of the saints pronounced the downfall of the Carnal Church. Another pause and the terror faded. The vision passed to depict the ascent of Beatrice to Heaven.

In no other place, save when in Purgatory Beatrice reveals

<sup>1</sup> *Purgatorio*, xxvii, 16-18:

In su le man commessa mi protesi  
Guardando il foco e immaginando forte  
Umani corpi già veduti accesi.

herself as 'veiled beneath the Angelic Feast', does Dante give clearer indications of the sacred reality he hid under the figure of Beatrice. The Holy Presence is presented to view, wrapt in a cloud, escorted by angels ascending as it meet after the manner of Christ Himself to Heaven. But is not this a curious and daring parallel if conceived of a mortal maiden? A shower of manna, so she seemed to Dante, no longer descending to be the food of mortals, but rising back to Heaven withdrawn for ever. It was under the image of the true Manna, Bread of Heaven, Food of the Angels, that Christ first proclaimed to His disciples His approaching Gift to mankind, and the words were echoed by St. Thomas, both in the hymn *Lauda Sion* and in the offices for Corpus Christi Day. These are not the only allusions to the Divine Mystery which Dante's Ode contains. We trace, presented in dramatic form, a direct reference to the prayer in the Canon of the Mass, in which the priest, alluding to 'the holy bread of eternal life and the chalice of everlasting salvation', implores that 'these sacrifices be borne in the hands of Thy holy angels to Thine Altar on high before the sight of Thy Divine Majesty'. Lastly, the song beginning 'Osanna', which Dante heard the angels sing, but of which he avers the remainder was lacking, was it not the hymn which from ancient times has been sung before the consecration to herald the coming of the Lord: 'Hosanna in excelsis (benedictus qui venit in nomine Dei)'? A 'false' imagination succeeded. In this the Host appeared to him, no longer miraculously transubstantiated to the spiritual Body and Blood of the Lord, but as a token devoid of life. He watched in his dream the Host reverently covered with the veil, and it seemed as though the word had gone forth, 'From now on I shall behold the beginning of peace'. So certain did it seem in that epoch that all the discords of the world centred round the abuses of an unworthy priesthood claiming miraculous powers. At the back of all the terror and woe which were to mark the passing of the Sacraments lay tranquil certainty in the dawn of a purer age.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE NEW VISION OF BEATRICE

A FAMILIAR FEATURE in the Mystic Way is the alternation of gloom and joy. After every season of exaltation follows an inevitable recoil. And in the depths of tribulation the devout lover learns to anticipate that the hour is approaching when he will see the Light.

We are now to learn in what manner the cloud of desperate apprehension of ill, lately described, was lifted from the lover's heart. Section xxxiv

Sitting one day in deep meditation, Dante was aware of the tremor in his heart which presaged the advent of the beloved Lady. A vision of love was at hand, proceeding from where the Lady abode, and crying joyously : ' Turn thy thoughts to bless the day when I seized thee ; that is what thou oughtest to do '. The voice brought him an immediate sense of happiness. His heart became so light it scarcely seemed his own.

The next happening was the coming of a gentle Lady of far fame and beauty, formerly much beloved by Guido, his chief friend. Her name was Giovanna (Joan). To her the name of Primavera (Spring) was given, ' as some think for her beauty '. Beyond her Dante beheld as in a vision the wondrous Beatrice advancing. They passed near by, one after the other, and Love speaking again within his heart made a little allegory of their names, playing upon the word Primavera, which in Italian is much the same word as *Prima verrà*, or it shall come first. In this he pointed out the name Giovanna may be compared to that of Giovanni (John the Baptist)—forerunner of the True Light. And Love went on to declare that Beatrice ought in reality to be hailed as Love by all who meditated with subtlety, because of her great likeness to himself (The Gospel of Eternal Love).

And with this radiant conviction in his mind that the ineffable gift of Heaven and the new revelation of Love were in effect but one and the same manifestation of the Christ,



Dante composed the sonnet which follows, concealing, he is careful to mention, certain words which it seemed fit to conceal. By this he trusted to restore to his chief friend his former admiration of the beauty of Primavera.

Joachim had foretold that the age of the Spirit would be preceded by the appearance of a prophet—and the Franciscans all held the Blessed Francis to be the Elijah who must first come.

Possibly, therefore, in Giovanna Dante shadows forth some definite Franciscan ideal to which at one time Guido had dedicated himself. Some of his happiest songs have the colour of Franciscan hymns. But a change had come over his Muse. His sonnets and songs became charged with a note of anguish. He spoke continually of living in danger of death, of a terror which knew no relief, of banishment and despair. In this his verse sounds the same recurring wretchedness which has been observed in the *New Life*. It can only be accounted for by the religious persecutions of the age. Passing from old ideals to a dangerous position of secret hostility to Rome, the two friends may often have looked back with a tender yearning to days when meditations in the convent and at the Holy Eucharist brought them a sense of beatitude. Thus Dante plays with the imagination that they are once again in harmony in the sonnet beginning :

‘ Guido I would that thou and Lapo and I  
Might as by incantation be transformed  
And set within a bark which in each wind  
Might sail the seas at your will and at mine.’

In the religious world at this time a definite note of expectancy filled the air. Petrus Johannis Olivi, whose orthodoxy had been for many years most bitterly attacked in his own Order, was acquitted in 1289 of all stain of heresy, and made a triumphant appearance as Lector in the Franciscan School at Florence. His vindication was hailed as the prelude to the adoption by the Church of purer ideals of faith and worship, with their former ideals no longer tossed or carried adrift for lack of a steersman, but lulled in perfect security and peace. The Franciscan ideal, honoured by members of the Tertiary Order, was summed up in the Sermon on the Mount and other words of Christ. It gradually set stirring a strong reaction against war. In particular it looked to the regeneration of the Church through Holy

Poverty, when the Franciscan Order purified from worldly taint should be powerful enough to reform the Roman Curia. Later, when the Minor Friars under the influence of the Inquisitors within the Order had acquired a sinister reputation, Guido forsook his first 'Lady'. He is found speaking with disparagement of the Minor Friars in more than one of his poems. She to whom he then gave himself he called *Manetta*, a word which may perhaps be Italianised, after the fashion of the age, from the Latin *manet*=it abides. And in *Manetta* we seem to trace a reflection of the promised Spirit of truth—the other Comforter—Who was to crown the New Age and abide with men for ever.<sup>1</sup>

In Sonnet 14 the early ideals of the two friends are beheld in exquisite harmony—a pure monastic Order in company with the Spiritual Gift Whose true name was Love.

## IO MI SENTII SVEGLIAR DENTRO ALLO CORE

Sonnet 14.

I felt awaken deep within my heart  
An amorous spirit which lay dormant there ;  
And then I saw Love coming from afar  
So glad that I could hardly recognise him ;  
He said : ' Now think for once to honour me ' ;  
And, as he uttered every word, he smiled.

How I felt the  
accustomed  
tremor stir  
my heart and  
how it seemed  
Love ap-  
peared to me  
joyous from a  
far place.

And while my Lord abode with me a space,  
Gazing towards that place whence he had come,  
I saw the Lady Joan and Lady Bice  
Coming towards the spot whereon I was,  
The one close on the other Wonderment.  
And as my mind calleth it back to me,  
Love said to me :—' The one is christened " Spring " ,  
The other " Love " , so like is she to me " .

What Love  
seemed to say  
within my  
heart and  
what his  
aspect.

And after  
Love had in  
such wise  
been with me  
a while I saw  
and heard  
certain  
things,

Too little, however, is known about the secret convictions of Guido Cavalcanti to enable the significance of this allegorical allusion to be interpreted with any certainty, and the above comments on this beautiful sonnet are made with hesitation. Much of Guido's work is extremely obscure. He is apt suddenly to weave a few lines of 'gergo' into his

(1) I say what  
I saw.

(2) I say what  
I heard.

<sup>1</sup> St. John, xiv, 16, 17. Et ego rogabo Patrem, et alium Paracletum dabit vobis, et maneat vobiscum in aeternum, spiritum veritatis, quem mundus non potest accipere.

poems, revealing unmistakably that his sentiments are not such as would be approved by the authorities. His long philosophical poem on Love formed the theme for more than one essay in interpretation by later Italian authors, and reveals its religious character very guardedly in more than one striking passage. Little is known of his life except in regard to the political animosities which eventually led to his death. But the fact that he set out on a pilgrimage to St. James of Compostella and stopped short at Toulouse has a certain significance, for Toulouse was the great centre of that reform movement which had its secret agents, its ministers, even its bishops, in many parts of France, Lombardy and Tuscany.

In commenting on these visions it is very hard not to lay too heavy a hand on the delicate fabric of the text veiled in diaphanous clouds. Dimly the travail of the soul in its grimly impeded search for truth can be apprehended. But the attempt to dictate the forms in which successive thinkers embodied their conclusions leads to inevitable bewilderment. Through all uncertainty of interpretation, however, the visions reveal themselves as born of the Spirit. Not through the labyrinth of sensual experience was Dante guided to 'the pure Intelligence which, weeping, Love implanted in him'.<sup>1</sup>

A modern writer,<sup>2</sup> alluding to the unfathomable depth of Dante's verse, has some penetrating remarks which apply with great force to the visions in the *New Life*.

'By communicating to us an affective atmosphere which envelopes the fact, Dante makes us attach ourselves firmly to its aesthetic reality—but the knowledge and the possible verification of this fact remain independent of the vividness, the fulness, the profundity of the expression. A fact is a medal with two sides: on one side it is represented by more or less verifiable ideas, on the other it is presented to our senses and to our affectivity in such a way as to be the object of an immediate 'prehension'. Suppose... that the medal is sufficiently transparent when held to the light for the outline of the reverse to be visible when we examine the obverse. The poet offers us the concrete side of fact, vision,

<sup>1</sup> *New Life*, Sonnet 45.

<sup>2</sup> Ramon Fernandez, 'A Note on Intelligence and Intuition', *Monthly Criterion*, October 1927 (Faber & Gwyer).

rhythm, affective emanation, etc., but as we discern through it the abstract side, the idea of this reality attaches itself to the prehension of this reality. . . . As for the impression of truth . . . produced by the verses of Dante, it is the result of a compromise between the ideal in part of these verses and their rhythm and affective emanation.'

There is a vivid contrast between this vision of Beatrice and the opening Vision of her in the *New Life*. Love no longer mourns over her, bearing her away from the Beloved. He laughs and claims her as identical with himself. We are reminded of the beautiful passage in which Meister Eckhart describes how God laughs into the soul, and she laughs back to Him : ' And the laughter breeds liking and liking breeds joy, and joy begets Love. . . . '

It would seem that the Vision bears witness to a moment of ecstatic hope, during which the Spirituals believed that the miraculous Gift conferred by Christ on His Church might yet be retained as the Pledge of His Love. In a Church shorn of abuses, self-reformed under the influence of pious monks, purified by the spirit Francis first introduced, would not the Holy Eucharist devoutly offered appear as the veritable likeness of the Divine Love? Some such conception seems to underlie the thrill of joy which greeted the mystic union of *Prima verrà* with Beatrice.

It is probable that in venturing to treat the Holy Eucharist under the veil of a fictitious personality, Dante was not without a misgiving that he might cause offence. He had now reached a point in the narrative, when it would appear he deemed some justification should be offered for this method of composition. All three main characters in the *New Life*, Beatrice, the Lady at the Window and Love, hide abstract conceptions under the guise of a human personality, and a similar method is adopted in each case. Human attributes are ascribed to them. They move hither and thither ; they walk or sit ; they speak ; they weep or smile ; they are moved by sorrow, pity, indignation, joy. In this key-chapter Dante proves by reference to the classics that from a literary point of view he has good precedent for this device of personifying abstract things. Ostensibly he is only concerned to justify his presentation of earthly Love as a human being, but it must be admitted that he has really no need at all to defend himself for this. Both in the classics

Section xxv.

and no less among the moderns, earthly Love, if that be all, presented as a youth, is so familiar an image as to call for no remark from the most captious critic. That there is good ground for inferring that the real purport of this elaborate justification is to demonstrate that the poets have always enjoyed full liberty to present any kind of abstract idea in human form.

'We see that the poets have spoken to inanimate things as if they had sense and reason, and have made them speak together, and not only real but unreal things; for instance, they have said of things which do not exist that they speak, and have said that many qualities of things speak as if they were beings and men; thus if this be so the composer in rhyme has a right to do the same, not indeed unless he have some particular reason, but only in the event of his having a particular reason he should be able afterwards to make clear in prose.'

The examples from the classics on which Dante took his stand are full of significance. For the personification of Love it was sufficient to quote Ovid's *Remedy of Love*. But the quotation from Virgil introduces Juno, 'a goddess hostile to the Trojans', in act to speak to Æolus, 'lord of the winds', who made reply. We need not pause to consider what abstract ideas Dante believed Virgil to have personified in the figures of Juno and Æolus (we have his own word for his belief in the allegorical nature of the *Æneid*), but it had nothing to do with Love, nor had the succeeding examples. Lucan is quoted as personifying Rome, as though it were animate, and Horace, himself quoting from Homer, is introduced addressing his own poetic faculty as though it possessed a distinct personality. Evidently, then, Dante relied on these carefully selected quotations to form a good precedent, not only for personifying Love, but also for personifying Divine forces, such as underlie the figures of Juno and Æolus, world powers such as Rome, and subjective influences such as man's own Muse. Always, he bids his readers remember, there was a serious purpose in the minds of poets who wrote thus figuratively, and all who follow the same course must have an argument (*ragionamento*) in their own minds in regard to such images.

'Deep shame would rest on one who should set any

matter in rhyme under cover of a figure, or give it a rhetorical colour, yet should not be able, when asked, to strip the veil from his words so as to restore to them their true meaning. My chief friend and I are well acquainted with some who rhyme in this stupid way.' [This most noble Lady, about whom in the preceding words we have been arguing, came to very great favour among the people] . . .

Very significant are these words, in which Dante steps as it were out of the picture in order to impress on his readers that he was hiding a weighty purpose under his fictitious love story. The words are rendered even more significant by the reference to Beatrice herself in the next sentence, which, however, has been artfully divided from its context by a device very common in the art of disguising, that of introducing a break of continuity by commencing a fresh chapter or canto. It was as though he would declare to the understanding reader that though he was apparently only referring to the abstract idea of earthly Love, yet he had really *in the preceding words* been reasoning about the abstract idea concealed under the image of Beatrice, no less than the esoteric conception of Love such as was revealed by Olivi and his disciples.

Having impressed upon his readers that he was inspired Section xxvi. by a serious purpose in presenting abstract ideas as human beings, a purpose he was fully able to explain, Dante proceeded to sing the praises of his Lady in terms which exalted her as Divine more openly than anything he had said of her before. This may have been partly a reflection of his own mood at the moment. For Beatrice is presented through the medium of a subjective haze of emotion, and the succeeding songs represent the climax of the radiant expectation figured in Section xxiv. They form an artistic climax, designed to show forth the ineffable glory of the Blessed One, in order that the approaching tragedy of the withdrawal from earth by Divine decree might be fully apprehended.

In Sonnet 15 we are, perhaps, to see the Host borne in procession through the streets for the consolation of the sick. Men run to adore the pledge of Christ's Presence, every tongue stilled, all eyes reverently cast down. Here is revealed the graciousness, the deep humility of the Son of Man towards erring mortals who realise that This is indeed a thing come down to earth from Heaven—a Miracle in

very truth. There steals into all hearts an ineffable sense of joy tempered by the conviction of their own unworthiness.

The sonnets which depict adoring crowds subdued to reverent awe in the presence of Beatrice can hardly be taken in all seriousness as meant to describe the passing of the Florentine maiden along the foul and dangerous streets of the city. If there be any foundation in fact for the exquisite picture, it may possibly have been some rumour of her demeanour in convent life ; where rare gifts of beauty and piety were wont to be hailed as miraculous by the nuns, rejoicing in what seemed to suggest the presence in their midst of a saint.

But in truth these sonnets bear all the marks of a vision, and fall into place as a fitting sequence to the vision in Sonnet 14, foreshadowing the advent of a spiritual Church. The glorious aspect of the Holy Eucharist in the anticipated New Age is dwelt upon with awe. Here is no hint of deluding, no note of terror, torture or death. Beatrice, noble and true, transmuted to the likeness of Love, inspires all hearts with ardour. She seems what in truth she is, 'a thing come down from Heaven to earth' to show forth the Miracle of Christ's redeeming Love. Even more powerfully is depicted the effect of Beatrice on those who are of the company most intimately admitted to the Presence, on the priests and monks 'who go with her', who are bound to render thanks to God for her grace. Envy, the prevailing vice of convent and Curia alike, finds no place among them. Clothed in nobleness and love and faith, they go their way linked together by their service. Humility abides with them. They partake of the honour accorded to the sacred Miracle and are blessed by all. Such was the Vision of the New Age, in which the Eucharist should move all hearts with true devotion and display its richest fruits in the pure and humble lives of its ministry.

Terrible, indeed, was the contrast between this picture and that presented by the arrogant, often depraved, officials of the Roman Curia, and by the ignorant and superstitious crowds of worshippers. Neither to priest nor people, so it seemed to many, did the recurring miracle of Christ's Presence on earth bring reverence or change of heart.

Whatever the future ages may have done to bring about the realisation of Dante's dream (and they have done much), it is unhappily certain that his momentary gleam of expecta-

# THE NEW VISION OF BEATRICE

tion that a purer age of faith was about to dawn in the Church was doomed to fade.

## TANTO GENTILE E TANTO ONESTA PARE

Sonnet 15.

(This sonnet is so easy to understand from what has been narrated above that it has no need of any division.)

So noble, so adorned with honour seems  
My Lady when she proffers her Salvation,  
That every tongue, stammering becometh dumb,  
And eyes lack boldness to gaze steadfastly.  
She goeth forth, aware they sing her praise,  
Benignly habited in lowliness,  
And like an apparition that hath come  
On earth from Heaven to show a Miracle ;  
Such sweetness flows from her through eyes to heart,  
Who hath not proved it may not understand.  
It seems that from her smile there issues forth  
A spirit peaceful and imbued with Love,  
Which comes bidding the soul—to sigh.

## VEDE PERFETTAMENTE OGNI SALUTE

Section xxvii.  
Sonnet 16.

Salvation perfect and complete doth see,  
Whoso mid noble souls my Lady sees.  
Who walk beside her, these are rightly bound  
To render thanks to God for His dear Grace ;  
Her beauty is of such o'ermastering force  
No envy shows in them of other souls ;  
Nay, but she makes them go her way wrapped round  
With nobleness, fidelity and love.  
At her appearing, all is rendered lowly ;  
And not alone in her appears delight  
But honour is conferred through her on each.  
So grand and noble in her operations  
That none can call her back to memory  
Who sigheth not in ecstasy of Love.

I say in whose  
company the  
Lady appears  
most  
wondrous.  
I say how  
gracious was  
her com-  
panionship.  
I tell of those  
things which  
she by her  
power  
wrought in  
others.  
(1) In what  
she wrought  
in women, to  
wit through

themselves. (2) What she wrought in them through others. (3) How she wrought not only in women but in all persons ; and not only while present herself but that by the remembrance of her she wrought wondrously.

Even as he lingered over his picture of a purified Church in the future, Dante realised that he had not defined to himself or others exactly what his Lady actually meant to



him now :—‘ that which at the present time she wrought in me’. Accordingly he began to compose an Ode with the design of declaring ‘ how I seemed to be disposed towards the working of her power, and in what manner her essential property took effect on me’.

Section  
xxviii.

He had more than once striven to tell in what manner Beatrice affected him. But he had now changed. Old things had passed away ; the new age was merely matter for speculation ; the theme of the Ode was to be his attitude towards Beatrice ‘ in the present time.’ Possibly, he proposed to make clear to himself and to others the extent to which the Gospel of Divine Love had affected his attitude towards the Holy Eucharist. His reaction towards the Rite had changed since the time of his early aspiration, and he aims at expressing first the mode in which he was now disposed to receive the Virtù residing in the Sacrament ; next, with what power this was now imparted to him. Had he finished this Canzone as he planned to do, much light might have been thrown on the hidden doctrines of the Spirituals. Evidently there was much more in his mind about the mystic theme which he was eager to impart to his readers. But he wrote, after all, no more than fourteen lines.

It is to be inferred that he now no longer shunned the presence of his Lady, but was able to rejoice in communion with something of his old fervour transmuted into new apprehensions of love and truth.

## SI LUNGAMENTE M’HA TENUTO AMORE

Ode 3  
(unfinished).

For so great length of time hath Love possessed me,  
And made his mastery familiar,  
That as at first he ruled me forcibly  
So now he dwelleth sweet within my heart ;  
Hence when his valour taketh hold on me  
So that my spirit seems to flee away,  
Then doth my feeble soul experience  
Such sweetness that my visage pales thereat.  
He makes my sighs go circling in speech ;  
And forth they issue, calling on my Lady  
To grant me more Salvation.  
Whene’er she sees me, this befalleth me ;  
How lowly is this Thing passeth belief.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

*Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populi! Facta est quasi vidua* Section XXIX.  
*domina gentium.*

‘I was still in the act of setting forth this Ode and had finished so far as the above stanza when the Lord of Justice called this most noble one to glory under the banner of that blessed Queen the Virgin Mary whose name was in highest reverence in the words of this blessed Beatrice.’

The words with which Dante preluded his announcement of the dread news form the key-note of the *New Life*. In these words Jeremiah had foretold the passing of the Jewish Church, the Age of the Father. In these words the Spirituals proclaimed the passing of the Roman Church, the Age of the Son. They were consecrated by long usage to mark the anguish of the faithful over the crucifixion of the Son of God. They were re-echoed by devout men in an age when the Son of God was crucified again by unworthy priests profaning His Presence by the sale of what is beyond price. The earnest expectation which at one moment filled all minds that the Church was about to be reformed from within by the zeal of holy monks was soon dispersed. A crisis had taken place which led many of the devout to conclude that the Church as then constituted under the supreme control of the Roman Curia had definitely forfeited all its Divine privileges, and was in effect dead.

Dante was actually engaged in trying to define what Beatrice meant to him ‘at the present time’, and had written the fourteen lines above, so he tells us, when his Lady passed away.

The brevity of the announcement serves to fix attention on the few points mentioned. We are told to take note that her withdrawal was a punishment inflicted on mankind. It was the *Lord of Justice* who summoned her from earth.

Next, this most noble being was summoned to glory 'under the banner of that blessed Queen Mary whose name was in highest reverence in the words of this blessed Beatrice'. A passage in the Canon of the Mass runs as follows: 'Being in communion with and venerating the memory of first the glorious Mary, ever a virgin, Mother of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ'.<sup>1</sup>

But for all followers of Joachim the name of the Blessed Virgin held in addition a special significance. It was the symbol for that voiceless act of speculation or contemplation in which, so Dante believed,<sup>2</sup> man can alone find felicity by exercising the divine element in his intellect. The great hymn of the great contemplative St. Bernard to the 'Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son',<sup>3</sup> is composed in its every exquisite line to bear this mystic sense beneath the fervent adoration of the Virgin's human personality. It is in the Eucharist that the act of contemplation is raised to its highest point in the Beatific Vision.

There is no description of the passing of Beatrice. Foreseeing that this omission would be remarked, Dante gave three reasons for his reticence on the subject. In the first place the manner of her withdrawal to Heaven made no part of the purpose he had summed up in his opening lines of the *New Life* as his own reaction to it so far as memory served.<sup>4</sup> Next he felt himself to be unequal to the task of describing her departure. Lastly, and this is indeed mysterious, he could not tell the whole story without praising himself, a thing to be deemed most blameworthy.

We venture to infer that it was Dante himself, possibly in the very words recalled above, who first dared to announce that the long-expected hour had struck. The fragmentary character of the 'confessions' which make up the book of the *New Life* suggest that they may have been issued at irregular intervals for circulation among a group of persons well versed in their covered phraseology and eagerly awaiting each successive instalment of spiritual enlightenment. It is hardly possible that Dante could take part in any intellectual movement without becoming its leader and chief exponent. He had no equal in breadth of outlook, force of

<sup>1</sup> *The Order and Canon of the Mass in Latin and English* (Burns Oates & Washbourne). Communicantes et memoriam venerantes, in primis gloriosæ semper Virginis Mariæ, Genitricis Dei, et Domini nostri Jesu Christi. . . .

<sup>2</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. IV, c. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Paradiso*, xxxiii, 1 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *New Life*, I.

expression or daring. In the stand that men were making for primitive ideals of Christianity in opposition to Roman abuses in faith and practice, there is much to show that he took no inconsiderable part. His strong condemnation of indulgences, relics, and bought prayers for the dead expressed in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* were sufficient to have brought him to the stake had he not been under powerful protection at the time when these utterances became public. And his unmeasured condemnation of the Papal Curia in general, and the Popes contemporary with himself who presided over it in particular, were frankly heretical, and must have brought an appalling fate upon a less awe-inspiring personage than he later became.

But his first assays in measuring strength with spiritual wickedness in high places were of a tentative nature. All that we know of him tends to show that his intellect, stimulated by deep study of the Bible, early revolted against the perversions of Christian doctrine forced upon the world by a corrupt administration, and we find confirmation of his activities in the cryptic reference to his own share in the happenings which led to the withdrawal of Beatrice from earth, or, rather, to man's recognition of her withdrawal.

It would be a mistake to pass over as mere medieval mystery-making the emphasis he laid on the word Nine in connection with the passing of Beatrice.

'I say that according to the Arabian [Mohammedan] style, Section xxx. her most noble soul departed in the first hour of the ninth day of the month; and according to the Syrian [Jewish] style, it departed in the ninth month of the year—and according to our own style it departed in that year of our indiction (that is of the years of our Lord) wherein the perfect number was nine times completed in that century in which she was placed in the world. And she was of the Christians of the thirteenth century.'

The date of her departing depends on the value assigned to the perfect number. In medieval symbolism ten held this place of honour, and the date accepted was 8th June 1290.

The main purport, however, of associating Beatrice with the number Nine was evidently to identify her with the Deity.

'There might be one reason why this number was so friendly to her: according to Ptolemy and to Christian

truth there are nine moving Heavens, and according to the general opinion of astrologers the said Heavens exert their influence down below according to their conjunctions. This number was attached to her so that we might understand that all the nine moving Heavens were in absolute accord with each other in her engendering.'

In writing the *Banquet*, avowedly to throw light on the mysteries shrouded in the *New Life*, Dante quotes the opinion

'that a soul born under such a propitious disposition of the Heavens would receive so much of the Deity that it would be as it were another Incarnate God.'<sup>1</sup>

This, it would seem, was the theory of the Incarnation accepted by philosophic thinkers. It serves to link Beatrice indissolubly with the Son of God, His Presence and His very Self, since the time of 'her engendering', as indicated by the Heavens, was no other than the moment of the Incarnation.

Dante went on to declare, in language which hardly seems to admit of any other interpretation, that Beatrice is in very truth the figure of God Incarnate. He says :

'Considering the matter more subtly and according to the infallible truth, this number Nine was her very self. The number Three is the root of Nine, because without other number, multiplied by itself it makes Nine, even as we see manifestly that Three times Three make Nine. Therefore if Three is the sole factor of Nine, and the sole factor of miracles is Three, namely Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Who are Three in One, this Lady was accompanied by the number Nine to give to understand that she was a Nine, that is a Miracle, whose root is the wondrous Trinity alone.'

The words unmistakably indicate the manifestation of the Godhead to mankind. It is the language of theology. Under the aspect of the Miracle inherent in the Blessed Sacrament, the above definition of Beatrice is fully satisfied. Under the aegis of this Miracle celebrated in the Holy Eucharist, Christ founded His visible Church on earth to be a living witness to Divine Truth, assuring her thereby of His continued Presence. Corrupted in the course of many ages, and at length wholly captured by the spirit of Antichrist, the Church

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. iv, c. 21.

as an ecclesiastical entity was doomed to forfeit her crowning glory. From the unworthy priesthood was withdrawn the awful power of creating at the Altar the Body of the Lord. The Presence of Christ no longer vivified the visible Church on earth, and thus, notwithstanding her glorious Liturgy and venerable ceremonies, she appeared in the eyes of the devout lifeless and corrupt. So completely was the life of the Catholic Church identified with the recurring Miracle of the Blessed Sacrament that, once her priesthood had forfeited the power to bring this to pass, death ensued. Her 'beauteous Limbs', of which Beatrice spoke with pride in the Earthly Paradise,<sup>1</sup> her 'buried flesh', would seem to figure the external rites, of which Dante had early experienced the alluring charm, now buried deep under the abuses of the times.

Aloft in Heaven, set free from earthly and contaminating influences, the Angel of the Holy Eucharist is displayed in His authentic and spiritual meaning as the Apex of the Intellect—the divinely bestowed faculty through which God is able to communicate with the soul of man—'great enough to be God, small enough to be me'. 'This then is the Nobility which God has implanted in the soul, her beatific nature which is receptive to the Grace of God, so that in this Grace the light of God's pure nature can shine into the soul and the word of the Trinity be spoken in her mind, and the life of eternity energeise in her.'<sup>2</sup> More and more clearly in course of time does Dante seem to connect the quasi-miraculous ecstasy he once found in the highest office of the Church with a manifestation of the Divine excellence sown and infused into us from the beginning of our engendering, 'that which is alone able to lead us to the supreme blessedness'. It has been felicitously defined by Dr. Wicksteed as 'the awareness of direct emotional reaction between the individual consciousness and the All-pervading, felt as a Presence'.<sup>3</sup>

Thoughts of the living maiden, beloved of Dante, do not at this point seem to share in the conception of Beatrice as

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.*, xxi, 48, 51.

<sup>2</sup> Meister Eckhart, *op. cit.*, 304. Definitions innumerable have been essayed of the mystic faculty. Eckhart is very close to Dante in expression and intent. Cf. *Banquet*, Bk. iv, c. 22, for the identification of Nobility with this mystic sense which 'speaks to our Reason'. Intimations from Beatrice in the *Inferno* always reached Dante through Virgil.

<sup>3</sup> *Reactions between Dogma and Philosophy*, p. 131.

withdrawn from earth. The note of personal grief is conspicuous by its absence. The unutterable disaster to Italy and to the whole world of a Church void of life, abandoned by her Founder, overshadowed every other consideration. Yet it seems very probable from subsequent lyrics, in which the note of personal grief is dominant, that it was the sudden death, perhaps in the cloister, of the maiden whom he loved which brought Dante in the sharp pang of grief to the conviction that the visible Church of Christ, so long identified through Eucharistic communion with the person of the saintly maid, had been taken from mankind.

Almost any event may be hailed as conclusive evidence that a crisis long anticipated has at length taken place. There is much to show that the minds of men in all classes at this period were keyed to a pitch of insistent expectation of an approaching doom. We learn from the Joachist story of Pietro Murrone's election as Pope that the prophecies of this hermit were spreading dismay among the highest dignitaries in Church and State. In the Curia itself were many who foreboded disaster. The abuses of the Church were rank, most emphatically proclaimed by its most loyal and distinguished sons. All efforts at reform from within were continuously baffled by the host of greedy permanent officials, mostly lawyers, who stubbornly opposed any change. The Church as a wealthy temporal power could not be mended because its riches had fallen into the wrong hands. But Joachim had foretold that one day near at hand it would be ended, and to this consummation the hearts of devout men turned as to the opening of the Millennium.

As the end of the century drew on the tribulations men had been encouraged to regard as forerunners of the New Age became unendurable. The close of a century is often marked by a world-weariness, which suggests to men's minds the thought of cataclysmic change. The signs of the times were such as seemed to be forecasted in the Apocalypse. Men discovered in the story of 'the woman drunken with the blood of the Saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus'—that whore with whom 'the kings of the earth have committed fornication'—an image of the Papal Curia ruling in carnal power, oblivious of its sacred mission. Religious fervour eagerly appropriated the succeeding passages which herald the triumph of the saints. The building of the New Jerusalem was to be the glorious task of the New Age of the

Spirit. The destruction of Antichrist, the Beast, was to be followed by that of Death and Hell—grim synonyms for the deadly punitive powers of the Carnal Church. They were confidently awaited as the Second Death by those who groaned in captivity.<sup>1</sup>

Then would the Age of the Spirit and of the Spiritual Church be inaugurated. Then would all men have free access to the Word of God, to the promises of their Lord. 'The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.'<sup>2</sup>

One outstanding event occurred in 1290, sufficient in its reactions upon the world to convince men that Christ had withdrawn His Presence from the Church. This was the fall of Acre, the last stronghold of the Christians in the East, into the hands of the Mohammedan chief who had long been besieging it. The decisive defeat of the Christian armies swept away the costly efforts of Crusaders in blood and treasure during the past two centuries. The result was a mighty triumph for Islam—a deep and lasting humiliation for the Church.

The siege of the city by the infidels had been regarded as an arbitrament by battle between the rival creeds of Christ and Mohammed. The Papal curses had fallen like hail about the ears of the infidels. Every conceivable effort had been put forth by the Church. Thousands of Masses had been said; day and night prayers ceased not. The Christian hosts were assured of victory in this world and the next. All was unavailing. Acre fell, and all hopes of Christian domination in the East, and of the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre, were at an end. The massacres which followed re-echoed in every horrible particular throughout Europe. A feeling that God had deserted His people, that the Church had forfeited her powers, pervaded the entire Christian world.

The Spirituals, already penetrated with the belief that Nicholas IV had invited the judgment of Heaven by tamper-

<sup>1</sup> Rev. xx, 14. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

Cf. *Inferno*, 1:

Where the despairing outcries thou shalt hear  
Of those tormented souls of antique worth  
Who one and all foretell the Second Death.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. xxii, 17.



ing with the sacred Rule of Francis and persecuting the Saints, accepted the discomfiture of the Christian host as the anticipated sign. It was a matter of long-drawn-out controversy among the rival parties of the Franciscans whether in revising the Rule for general use he had so *altered* it as to bring upon the Carnal Church the destruction long foretold as the inevitable consequence of such desecration. Olivi in his letter to Brother Conrad some years later defended Nicholas III from the imputation of altering the Rule, except in so far as 'sincerely and without fraud, or deceitful comment he might preserve it'. But this seems to mark with significance his omission of any mention of the alterations enumerated above made by Nicholas IV. The changes Nicholas IV made, especially in the Rule of the Tertiary Order, had in effect far-reaching consequences. They enabled Inquisitors within the Order to amass wealth and act entirely independently of their Superiors.

According to Angelo Clareno, author of *The Tribulations*, Saint Francis had predicted that 'if the sovereign Pontiff renders doubtful truths which are certain and defines as heresies what the Church, its divines and the regulations of saints teach as articles of catholic faith and the summit of all perfection, none shall judge him, but he shall judge himself and condemn himself by the decrees which he rashly issues, impelled by self-will, on his own authority, against the doctrine of the Saints and the rules approved by the Church'.

There was more than sufficient in the alterations made in the Rule of Francis and in the persecution of holy men for their fidelity to the promises and precepts of their Master and their reliance on the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit to lend to the action of Nicholas IV the colour of fulfilling this prophecy. It was an age when cause and effect were somewhat rashly linked together, even by men of intellect. Rumour had to take the place of any authentic news. The disaster of Acre, following swiftly upon Papal Bulls which plainly betrayed the overwhelming influence of Inquisitors in his counsels, appeared to the devout as the writing on the wall.

## CHAPTER XIII

### DANTE ANNOUNCES HER DEATH TO THE WORLD

‘AFTER THE most noble Lady departed from this age, all the aforesaid City was left as it were desolate, widowed and despoiled of all dignity. Wherefore, still weeping in this desolate City, I wrote to the Chief Rulers of the earth somewhat of its condition, taking that beginning of Jeremiah the Prophet, “How doth the City sit desolate”.’ Section xxxi.

There is nothing more startling in the entire story of the *New Life* than the above declaration. Dante made it, so he tells us, in order to account for his use of the words of Jeremiah as prelude to the *New Matter* he was about to introduce. He realised that without the aid of some clue to the sense in which Jeremiah's words are here used, readers must inevitably be mystified. But having perforce written the letter in Latin, he omitted it from its natural context in this place because he and his friend had decided from the outset that the *New Life* should be written throughout in the language understood by the people. Quotations from Scripture, which it was not permissible to translate, are an exception to this rule. To insert the letter written to the chief rulers must have betrayed the fact that it was concerned not with the death of a beautiful Florentine maiden, but with the moribund condition of the Church, now that the miraculous rite which lent her Divine authority had been withdrawn from her keeping. Incredible as it may appear, there are solid grounds for believing that the letter is still in existence.

It is remarkable that among the few letters of Dante which have come down to us bearing incontestable marks of authenticity is one addressed to the chief rulers, officers of the first rank of the Church Militant, which begins with the very words, ‘How doth the City sit desolate, that was full of people: she is become as a widow that was great among

nations', goes on to describe the forlorn condition of Rome, and actually announces 'the funeral of Mother Church'.

This is the celebrated Epistle VIII, of which Villani records that it was 'written to the Italian Cardinals when the vacancy occurred after the death of Pope Clement (1314) in order that they might agree to elect an Italian Pope'.

Villani's evidence is sufficient to prove that Epistle VIII was commonly handed about in 1314 as the production of Dante, and was accepted as his remonstrance on the events then taking place. But although there are passages in it which make it in some respects an appropriate comment on Church affairs in 1314, it does not follow that it was originally written at this time. The state of things which might have induced Dante to write such a letter in 1314 had already arisen in 1292.

The language in which the letter is written is so high-wrought and hieroglyphic that parts of it are almost unintelligible, while some passages are of such universal application as to be appropriate in various states of affairs, and have, indeed, more than once, been grafted by more modern Italians into their own appeals to their countrymen.

In order to identify Epistle VIII with the letter alluded to in the *New Life*, it must be shown that it corresponds closely not only with the events which were taking place in 1292-3, but with the peculiar religious atmosphere characteristic of these years. Next, that it contains passages which cannot be reconciled with the situation of affairs in 1314. Lastly, that the hints it affords of the writer's personality, while agreeing with that of a youthful Dante, are out of accord with that which he displayed in the letters he wrote in later life.

The letter announcing the death of Beatrice was written at some indeterminate time after 1290, while Dante, still in bitter grief, was staying in 'the disconsolate and widowed City'. There are several allusions in the *New Life* to 'the aforesaid City', without, however, any mention of its name. But in Epistle VIII the City 'that was great among nations and is become a widow' is exposed as 'Rome, the Apostolic See, widowed and abandoned', 'over which we, like Jeremiah, are constrained to lament'. From classical times onwards 'the City' was always Rome. In ecclesiastical diction it corresponds with Jerusalem, and the words of Jeremiah were frequently appropriated by religious writers to expose the evils of Rome as the seat of world government, both civil

# DANTE ANNOUNCES HER DEATH TO THE WORLD

and religious. The same language which Dante used of the desolate and widowed City of Rome in the *New Life* and in his letter to its Chief Rulers, he used in his appeal to 'German Albert' <sup>1</sup> a few years later :

'Come and behold thy Rome which doth lament,  
Widowed and desolate, calling night and day,  
My Caesar, why not bear me company?'

The *New Life* letter was addressed to 'i principi della terra', the elders or chief rulers of the City. In Epistle VIII the same word 'principes' is used of the elders of the Jewish Church, and the Cardinals, to whom Epistle VIII is addressed, are called 'primi praepositi pilae ecclesiae militantis', chiefs in the front rank of the Church Militant. Thus it would appear that the *New Life* letter and the Epistle VIII were addressed to the same persons.

The purport of both letters is identical, that in the *New Life* to call attention to the state of 'the City', widowed as it were and despoiled of all its dignity; that of Epistle VIII to expose the existence in Rome of that very crime of avarice, 'which made the ancient priesthood an abomination, did away the ministry of the tribe of Levi and brought siege and destruction on the chosen city of David'. It was for this very reason, the avarice of ecclesiastics, that the Spirituals had been brought to the conviction that the spiritual domination of Rome as manifested in the Papal Curia was doomed, just as that of Jerusalem in the old dispensation had come to an end,

The *New Life* letter announced the death of Beatrice to the chief rulers of the City. The Age of the Son was inextricably bound up with the Sacramental system by reason of the attendant priesthood, and this the Spirituals believed was about to be swept away. The sign and seal that the Age of the Spirit was about to commence would be the withdrawal from the world, no longer worthy to possess it, of the Blessed Sacrament. In Epistle VIII Dante actually announced that this momentous event had taken place, although, alas, it had passed unnoticed by the world. It had been left to him, greatly daring, he said, to declare this awful truth: 'But one voice alone, one alone of filial piety, and that of a private individual, is heard at the *funeral obsequies* as it were of Mother Church'. Yet, though his voice alone had been

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.*, VI, 112.

uplifted to announce the truth, he was but giving voice to the universal sense of expectation :

‘ But, my Fathers, suppose not that I am a phoenix in the wide world. For everyone is murmuring or muttering or thinking or dreaming what I cry aloud ; even though they do not bear witness to the things they have discovered. Some remain hesitating, lost in astonishment. But will they always keep silence *about this thing*, nor bear testimony to their Maker ? ’

This was to go as far as it was possible to do, and he suffered still to live, towards proclaiming the withdrawal of Divine power from the Church and the dissolution of the Second Age. To conceive of the Church deprived by her fault of the miraculous Presence of her Lord was to behold her moribund, a decaying organisation of greedy usurpers. The funeral obsequies of Mother Church, mistress of the nations, had been sung.

There are many points in this remarkable letter which reflect the tone of thought prevalent among Olivi’s followers towards the close of the century. There is the strangely abbreviated confession of faith :

‘ We too confess the same Father and Son, the same God and Man, yea, the same Mother and Virgin.’ The guarded omission of any mention of the Holy Spirit is curiously characteristic of this epoch.

There is the compensating emphasis laid on the idea of Love as connected with St. Peter’s mission :

‘ We for whose sake and for whose salvation was the question repeated concerning Love, and it was said, “ Peter, feed my sheep ”.’

And this is further emphasised later on by the mention of

‘ those who usurp the office of shepherd ’ and ‘ the many sheep neglected and untended in the pastures, even if they be not actually driven forth from them ’. [A reference to those unjustly excommunicated.]

There is the somewhat daring reference to the inefficacy of Baptism as a means of moral regeneration :

‘ Ah, most loving Mother, Spouse of Christ, that by water and the Spirit doth bear sons to thy shame.’

## DANTE ANNOUNCES HER DEATH TO THE WORLD

For the Spirituals rebelled against the mechanical theory of Baptism popularly taught, and refused to admit that God's love was limited by such an accident as there being no priest nor water at hand to baptise a dying infant.

There is a very striking allusion to the triumph of Islam after the recent fall of Acre :

'The fomentors of impiety, Jews, Saracens, and Gentiles, make a mock of our Sabbaths, and, so it is said, cry out, "Where is their God?" Perchance the renegade powers ascribe *this defeat* to their own wiles against the protecting angels.'

The stern rebuke to ecclesiastics in the front rank of the Church Militant is eminently after the manner of Olivi :

'You have neglected to guide the chariot of the Spouse of the Crucified along the track which lay before you ; but have gone astray from the track like the false charioteer Phaethon.' 'You have scorned the fire sent down from Heaven, where now altars are alight with a strange fire [to burn the brethren as heretics]. You who have sold doves in the temple, where what may not be reckoned by price [the Body and Blood of Christ] is exposed for sale to the hurt of those who commemorate [His Sacrifice]. Give heed to the scourge ; give heed to the fire.'

The University studies which Dante derides in Epistle VIII with the zest of a student who has just gone through the profitless mill, were characteristic of the closing years of the thirteenth century when theology was suspect, when lawyers held the field, and distinction was to be won solely by a knowledge of the Decretals.

'Your Gregory lies among the cobwebs ; Ambrose lies neglected in the cupboard of the clergy ; and Augustine along with him . . . and they cry up instead I know not what *Speculum*, and Innocent and him of Ostia ' [Decretalists].

In 1292 the *Speculum Judiciale* was at the height of its vogue, its author Durandus being still alive. Within twenty years a complete change had taken place in the academic world, and all this was out of date.

Epistle VIII was plainly written during an interregnum in both Papacy and Empire :

‘ It behoves you to keep before the eyes of your mind . . . the present condition of the City of Rome, deprived as she now is of the one and the other of her luminaries, and sitting solitary and widowed as is written above.’

This exactly coincides with the position of affairs in 1292-3. After the death of Nicholas IV in May 1292, the Church remained without a head for twenty-seven months, until the election of Celestine V in July 1294. Dante recognised no Emperor who had not been crowned King of the Romans at Rome.<sup>1</sup> For him the Empire, after the death of Frederick II in 1250 had remained vacant. Adolph of Nassau, who was elected German King in May 1292, was never recognised as Emperor beyond his own estates, and held even these on an insecure tenure. He was a mere mercenary soldier, without prospect of extending his sway to embrace Imperial responsibilities.

In 1292, but never later, the College of Cardinals exactly corresponded with the allusions to it found in Epistle VIII. Dante directed his admonitions in this letter to all the Cardinals then sitting in conclave, but more particularly to those among them of Roman birth. He clearly expressed his conviction that entire responsibility for the long delay in the election of the Pope rested on the Roman Cardinals, and hinted that the delay might be attributed to the jealousy which subsisted between the rival factions of the Colonna and Orsini families :

‘ The wretched state of Rome concerns most chiefly you who have known the Tiber as little children. For though all Italians ought to love the capital of Italy as the common source of civil government, yet it is justly held to be especially your part to reverence it, because for you it is the very source of your being. And if at the present time misery has consumed with grief and confounded with shame the rest of the inhabitants of Italy, who can doubt but that you must blush with shame and grief, who have been the cause of so unwonted an eclipse of Rome, or rather of her Sun ? ’

<sup>1</sup> See *Conv.*, iv, c. 3. Frederick of Swabia, the last Emperor of the Romans—I say the last up to the present time, notwithstanding that Rudolf and Adolf and Albert have been elected since his death and that of his descendants.

## DANTE ANNOUNCES HER DEATH TO THE WORLD

The position of affairs in 1292-3 was exactly such as might give rise to this rebuke. Party feeling ran so high in these years between the Orsini and the Colonna families that the senatorial election could not take place. Riots ensued, churches were sacked, pilgrims visiting Rome were slain, some actually in St. Peter's itself, and, so it was said, by the Colonna. Everyone understood that no Pope could be elected because the Orsini would not have a Colonna nor the Colonna an Orsini, while no other had a chance at all. Out of the twelve Cardinals, six were of Roman birth, three members of the Orsini, two of the Colonna family, and John Boccamazi, who sided with the latter. Four Cardinals (including Benedetto Gaetano, of Anagni, afterwards Boniface VIII) were natives of other Italian towns. Two only were Frenchmen, and of these one died of the plague soon after the Conclave assembled. After the winter of 1292, the members of the Conclave took to deliberating apart. The three Orsini Cardinals declared their health would not permit of their remaining in Rome. They were joined at Rieti by Cardinal Matthew Aquasparta of Todi, and Cardinal Gerard of Parma, and held sessions there with the design, so it was believed, of carrying out the election without the Colonna. But meantime the two Colonna Cardinals, with their ally, John Boccamazi, held a kind of spurious conclave in Rome, intriguing to induce one or two of the others to join in electing a Pope independently of the Orsini. There was grave danger that Christendom, as had happened before, would be driven into schism by the election of rival Popes.

In Epistle VIII Dante singles out one, whom he addresses as Orsini, and implores him to influence the rest. It is very significant that the Head of the Conclave in 1292-4 was the venerable Latino Malabranca of Orsini. On him rested legal responsibility for ensuring that the prescribed formalities in the election of the Pope were duly observed. It was owing to his moderation and good sense that matters were not pushed to an extremity between the rival factions. He appears to have been himself deeply imbued with Joachist opinions, for he was in correspondence with Peter Murrone, the celebrated Spiritual Abbot of Mount Sulmone in Abruzzi, whose election as Pope Celestine V he subsequently brought about. In venturing to express his views about the Church, there was none to whom Dante could more properly have addressed himself.



‘And thou Orsini [who art] above all the others, suffer not thy colleagues who are out of favour to remain unhonoured for ever [by exclusion from the Conclave], but [so do] that with the authority of the Apostolic head [of the Conclave, *i.e.* Orsini himself] they may resume the venerable insignia of the Church Militant [their office in the Conclave] which they have been compelled to lay down, not as it were because they are unfit for that office [*emeriti*], but from no fault of their own [*immeriti*].’

It would seem that the Orsini were suspected of attempting to exclude the unpopular Colonna Cardinals from assisting at the Conclave, probably by some tacit refusal to function when they were present. Whether this be so or not, it is certain that Peter and Jacobus Colonna were not present when the Conclave met finally at Perugia in July 1294. Latino on that occasion conveyed to the Cardinals Peter Murroni’s alarming prophecy that God’s wrath would descend upon them all if they had not elected a Pope before All Saints’ Day, and proceeded to cast his own vote for the prophet himself. All the Cardinals followed suit, but as neither of the Colonna was present their votes had to be taken by proxy, and Latinus sent messengers to them for this purpose. Thus the excluded ones were after all allowed to resume the distinguishing mark of their office, the privilege of participating in the election of the Pope.

And thus the election of Celestine V achieved absolute unanimity.<sup>1</sup>

So far the evidence is clearly in favour of Epistle VIII as the authentic communication which was addressed by Dante about the year 1292 to the Chief Rulers (or Cardinals) on the funeral of Mother Church (his most noble Lady).

There are, however, discrepancies.

‘Thou also, adherent of the other Trasteverine faction, couldest thou without the reproof of thy better judgment prefer this purpose before the country of the illustrious Scipio, so that the anger of the deceased Pontiff might put forth leaves in thee, like a branch engrafted on a trunk not its own, as though thou hadst not put off [the spirit of] the Carthage that was conquered?’

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Celestini Papae V.*, Cardinal Jacopo Stefanesdii. Muratori, *Rer. Ital. Scrip.*, t. III. This is a remarkable document, couched in the highly figurative language of the Spirituals.

## DANTE ANNOUNCES HER DEATH TO THE WORLD

The word 'Trasteverine' (across the Tiber) seems to have been first used during the disputed coronation of Henry VII in 1312. The region on the right bank of the Tiber, which embraced the territory round St. Peter's and the Vatican, was in the hands of members of the Orsini family, who strongly sided against the Emperor and resisted every attempt of his adherents to procure his coronation at St. Peter's. Hence the word Trasteverine came to be used as a synonym for the Guelf party. Its inclusion in the letter seems to fix its date as subsequent to 1312. We venture, however, to suggest that the word may be an interpolation on the part of an editor trying to give a letter he knew to be out of date an air of modernity. Unfortunately for his purpose, it was by no means appropriate even at the later period. In this and in several other particulars the letter, considered as written in 1314, is out of accord with historical evidence. It is necessary at this point to consider the conditions which prevailed during the 1314 Conclave, when, according to Villani's most reliable evidence, Epistle VIII was handed about as a contemporary comment on the long-delayed Papal election.

Church and Empire were again vacant in 1314, but under what different circumstances ! The earnest expectation of a new age had died away. Joachim was almost forgotten. The Franciscan Spirituals, wasted by cruel persecutions, had dwindled to a small remnant whose leaders had, alas, degenerated into fanatics. But Duns Scotus, his disciples and opponents together, had revived the study of theology and, neglect of the Fathers could no longer be attributed to ecclesiastics. The twenty-two years between 1292 and 1314 were crowded with events which had transformed both Church and Empire. The atmosphere had undergone such a complete change as has been seen in our own times between 1900 and 1920. Henry VII, King of the Romans, crowned at Rome in 1312, had died—basely murdered, as all Ghibellines believed—the following year. The Pope and the French King, with Robert of Naples as their chief instrument, had intervened to turn his peaceful descent to Italy into a desperate and bloody enterprise. The Church had passed completely under French influence. Out of the twenty-four Cardinals who assembled in conclave at Carpentras in 1314, eighteen were Frenchmen. There were but six Italians among them, and of these four were Romans,

Napoleone Orsini, Jacopo and Pietro Colonna, and Francesco Gaetano. So fierce was the determination of the French to keep the issue of the election in their own hands that three months after the Conclave had assembled, the nephew of Clement V, in company with other Gascons, attacked the Bishop's palace in which the sessions were taking place and expelled all the Italian Cardinals under threat of assassination.

In such a position of affairs there could be no ground for making appeal to the Roman Cardinals as though the issue of events were in their hands, nor for bidding them blush with shame and grief, nor for arraigning them as 'the cause of so unwonted an eclipse of Rome or rather of her Sun'. Whether before or after their expulsion from the Conclave they were absolutely powerless. In such a position of affairs it would seem obviously unreasonable for the four Roman Cardinals to be blamed for the long delay in electing a Pope. Nor could they be reproved for the removal of the Papal See to Avignon, since only two of their number had even taken part in the election of Clement V, to whom the exile of the Curia was due. Moreover, it was extremely improbable that Dante should have addressed himself at all to Napoleone Orsini, the only Orsini in the College in 1314. Napoleone was an astute and dangerous politician, possessed of enormous wealth and with ambitions to match. He was under grave suspicion of having contrived the assassination of Benedict XI, and was notorious for his subservience to Philip IV. He addressed a letter to Philip, after the outrage on the Italian Cardinals at Carpentras, in which he endeavoured to influence the French King to consent to the election of an Italian Pope, and conceivably may have intended to open negotiations which should give the King an assurance that should Napoleone himself be elected Pope he would act in complete compliance with French interests. Failing his own election he was open to bribes, as he had always shown himself to be throughout his long career. Dante, who had unflinching insight into the motives of the public men of his day, could have no illusions about Napoleone's character, nor could he in his most optimistic mood expect from him disinterested reform.

It is difficult to see in what sense allusion to 'the other Trasteverine faction' could relate to the 1314 Conclave. There were not two Trasteverine or Guelf parties among the

four Cardinals, as is suggested by the word 'other'. There was not, in fact, even one Cardinal devoted purely and simply to the Guelf interest, for all four were united until the last month of the Conclave in trying to secure a Pope who would make Rome once more the Papal seat. Napoleone Orsini, at issue with his family, posed as a Ghibelline. Francesco Gaetano, though with French leanings, sided, at any rate on this occasion, with Napoleone. As for the Colonna Cardinals, though they owed much to the King of France, they stood firm in the demand for a Pope pledged to make his residence in Rome, and Pietro was the only member of the Conclave who, in August 1316, declined 'to favour King Robert' by giving his voice for Jacques Duèse (John XXII).

Once again it seems really inconceivable that Dante should have urged Napoleone Orsini in 1314 to take steps in order that the Colonna Cardinals 'might resume the venerable insignia of the Church Militant', when these two Cardinals were actually functioning in the Conclave by his side. Long ago their dignities and possessions had been restored to them, first by Benedict XI, next, more formally, by Clement V. There is surely here some egregious blunder of the editor or copyist, or what not; in recasting the letter for use in 1314, this passage ought to have been omitted.

The emendations we have suggested would entirely clear up this most obscure passage. If the word 'Trasteverine', which we have ventured to place in brackets, as the interpolation of copyist or editor, be omitted, the passage becomes readily comprehensible. Having appealed in 1292-3, first to the Orsini head of the Conclave not to exclude the unpopular Colonna from the honour of assisting at the Conclave, the writer went on to address the Colonna themselves as largely to blame for the hostility they had brought on themselves. The overbearing character of the Colonna had, in fact, made them enemies in every direction, and was to lead to their undoing. During the short reign of Nicholas IV they had completely dominated both Rome and the Pope. One of the family had been led on a car in triumph to the Capitol and acclaimed as Caesar. They had succeeded in turning Nicholas IV against his former allies the Orsini, and the Pope had been caricatured as stuck fast to a column, the arms of the Colonna. It was in every way natural for Dante to warn the Cardinals not to let the anger of the late Pontiff (Nicholas IV) against the Orsini continue to bear such ill

fruit. To warn these men, who behaved as though Rome belonged to them, that they were acting like Carthaginians and compassing the destruction of the City, was a rebuke all would recognise as just. Until they became more conciliatory the Conclave could not function. Dante urged them to lay aside old animosities and assume the spirit of a true Roman.

There is one definite allusion in Epistle VIII to the machinations of the French Cardinals, which was the decisive element in the 1314 Conclave. It occurs in the last sentence, and has every appearance of being, like the word *Trasteverine*, a clumsy interpolation. Omitting this sentence, we find that the letter ends in a strain of hope, even though a foreboding of approaching retribution makes itself heard :

‘ Although it cannot but be that the notorious scar of infamy must blot with disgrace the Apostolic Seat, until the fire for which the heavens that now are and the earth is reserved, yet shall there be a day of amends if you all, who were the authors of this straying from the track, will but fight manfully with one accord for the Bride of Christ, for the seat of the Bride, which is Rome, for our Italy, and to speak more at large, for the whole body politic now in pilgrimage on earth ; so that from the wrestling-ground surveyed on every side from the shores of ocean, of the contest already entered on, making glorious proffer of yourselves you may hear the cry, “ Glory to God in the highest ”, and may stand as a model to posterity for all ages to come.’

At the close of this fine peroration a lame reference to the 1314 election has been apparently wedged in as follows :

‘ So that from the wrestling-ground surveyed from the shores of ocean on every side, of the contest already entered on, you, making glorious proffer of yourselves, may hear the cry, “ Glory to God in the highest ” and “ *that the reproach of the Gascons who, burning with abominable lust, strive to usurp for themselves the glory of the Italian* ”, may be an example to posterity for all ages to come.’

It will be observed that ‘ *exemplum* ’, which may mean a model either of good or evil, takes a sinister meaning with the introduction of the Gascons. This is distinctly out of accord with the implied promise of peace on earth conveyed

## DANTE ANNOUNCES HER DEATH TO THE WORLD

in the words, 'Glory to God in the highest', the climax of the whole appeal. If the Cardinals in 1292 would but set aside personal considerations and proceed to the election of a Pope able to reform the Church and usher in the New Age, they would hear the angels sing, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men', and would participate in the fame of him whom they chose with wisdom. The rhetoric droops to a strangely lame conclusion if all this preamble is to result merely in putting to shame the Gascons, who, however obnoxious, were certainly not worth troubling about for all ages to come.

The letter is admittedly imperfect. In furbishing it up to make it seem applicable to the situation in 1314 it may be suspected that omissions were made as well as the two interpolations we have pointed out. But one striking personal allusion was overlooked, and this in itself, apart from other allusions, gives strong confirmation to the theory that Epistle VIII was written by Dante as a young man at a time when he was putting together into a coherent whole the lyrics of the *New Life*.

For it is to be observed that the personal note of the Epistle is that of a young man, an unknown provincial, adventuring for the first time into the arena of world affairs :

'Maybe you will rebuke me scornfully, saying, "Who is this man, who sets himself up to protect the Ark, tottering though it be?" . . . Verily I am one of the least of the sheep of the pasture of Jesus Christ. Verily I abuse no pastoral authority, seeing I possess no riches [implying that the only road to riches lay through Church preferment]. By the grace therefore not of riches but of God, I am what I am, and the zeal of His house hath eaten me up. For even from the mouths of babes and sucklings has been heard the truth well pleasing to God, and he who was born blind confessed the truth which the Pharisees not only concealed but strove to pervert. These are the justifications for my boldness.'

Such words express the ardent spirit which moved Dante while yet young to undertake not merely the mystic revelation of the *New Life*, but to declare in explicit though cautious language that Beatrice had passed from earth, and that the subsequent 'funeral of Mother Church' was then actually taking place. There is a measureless contrast between his modest exculpation of himself from the charge of

rashness in thus venturing to disclose a truth which was working in all minds and the dignified assurance which marked in later years the letters to Henry VII and to his own countrymen. Here in Epistle VIII is no reference to exile, no hint that the writer was a figure well known throughout Italy, feared by not a few, revered by a wide circle, already acclaimed as one of the most learned poets of the age. Assuredly it must strike amaze that Dante could seem to believe any could be found in 1314 to cry, 'Who is the man?'

The more closely the Epistle is studied, the more remarkable does it appear, and the less intelligible considered merely as an exhortation to the four powerless Roman Cardinals in 1314. It was eminently after the manner of the times for some enterprising student or bookseller to seize the opportunity afforded by a new interregnum in the Church in 1314, to bring to light Dante's old letter, forgotten by all but a few, furbish it up with a final topical allusion (which incidentally ruined the peroration), slip in a modern word or so, and circulate it as a new production of the famous poet, then mourning in retirement the downfall of all his hopes for the regeneration of Church and State.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE LAMENT OVER BEATRICE

THE LONG conflict between allegiance to the Church and allegiance to the doctrines embodied in the Gospel of Love was now nearly at an end. With his quasi-public declaration of the 'funeral of Mother Church', Dante had chosen his part. But before passing on to unfold the consolations of the new revelation, he put forth all his powers to compose a lament which should express the grief of the faithful Lover over the withdrawal from the Church of her miraculous powers.

Over the whole period immediately after the passing of Beatrice the *Banquet* sheds much light. 'One ought not', Dante there explained, apropos of his tears for Beatrice,

'on account of a greater friend to forget the services received from a lesser one. But if it really behoves him to follow the one and leave the other, he ought to follow the better, not abandoning the other, however, without some worthy lamentation, wherein he shows the cause of this greater love he bears to the one he is following'.<sup>1</sup>

This principle, most uncommon for the age in which he lived, of reverence for all genuine religious experience even after it had been superseded, was a distinctive mark of Dante's all-embracing unifying intellect, which garnered wisdom from every sincere seeker into the mysteries of the universe. It was very far indeed from his mind, in accepting a fuller revelation of truth, to depreciate or deny the glory of the Catholic Church, the illumination of its great divines, the surpassing beauty of its liturgy, the sense of beatitude formerly vouchsafed to himself in his interior life. The following lament was evidently composed shortly after the crisis defined by Dante as 'the funeral of Mother Church', and contains a remarkable picture of his divided state of mind.

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, 16.



Ode 4.

GLI OCCHI DOLENTI PER PIETÀ DEL CORE

In order that this Ode may appear all the more widowed after its end, I will divide it before I write it.

I. The Introduction.

(1) Why I am moved to speak.

(2) To whom I would speak.

My mind, grieved in its pity for the heart,  
Has suffered such deep fearful agony,  
It stays at length quiescent, overcome.

If at this time I would disperse the grief  
Which slowly, slowly, leads me unto Death,  
I needs must utter words expressing woe.  
And since I mind me I was wont to speak  
About my Lady whiles she was in life  
With you, ye noble souls, spontaneously,  
I will not speak of her to any else  
Save to the noble hearts such souls possess ;

(3) Of whom I am moved to speak.

And weeping I will tell of her,  
How that she sudden took her way to Heaven,  
And hath left Love behind mourning with me.

II. Discourse of Beatrice.

(1) The reason why she was taken from us.

Into high Heaven hath Beatrice passed away,  
Into the realm where angels are in peace,  
And bides with them, and ye, good souls, hath left.  
No quality of cold removed her from us,  
Nor yet of heat as happeneth to others ;  
It was her great benignity alone.

For, from the depths of her humility,  
The Light pierced through the sky with such great power  
It stirred the Sire eternal to amaze—  
So that there came to Him tender desire  
To call this great Salvation up from here  
And order so it should return to Him ;  
Because He saw that this oppressive life  
Was no way fit for this most noble Thing.

(2) How folks wept at her departure.

(a) Those who do not weep for her.

From her fair person there was separated  
The noble spirit, rich endowed with grace,  
And glorious abides in worthy place.  
Who weeps not for her when he thinks of her  
Hath heart of stone malicious, and so vile  
That no benign thought could find entrance there.  
The base heart harbours no exalted wit

# THE LAMENT OVER BEATRICE

Able to picture any image of her,  
And hence to such comes no desire to weep.  
But he hath deep distress and agony  
Of sighs, weeping his very life away—  
From every consolation bars his spirit—  
Who hath but once beheld within his thought  
What she was really—and how reft from us.

(b) Those  
who do weep  
for her.

Perplexities of doubt arouse in me  
Sore tribulation, when to my grieved mind  
Reflection summons her who cleft my heart ;  
And many times, weighing the thought of Death,  
There comes to me thereof longing so sweet,  
That it transmutes th' appearance of my face.  
When by the vision I am close possessed  
There seizeth me such pangs on every side  
I shudder from the anguish that I feel  
And am become so changed  
That shame holds me aloof from other folk.  
Afterwards, weeping in my lament, I call  
Ever on Beatrice, saying :—' *Now art thou dead* '.  
And whilst I call on her am comforted.

I tell of my  
own condi-  
tion.

To weep in grief, to utter anguished sighs  
O'erwhelms my heart when I find solitude ;—  
He who should hear would surely pity me.  
And what my life hath been after the time  
My Lady went away in the New Age  
No tongue could understand to utter it.  
And thus, my gentle souls, e'en had I wished,  
I could not well express just what I am ;  
The bitter life, degraded by vile things,  
Such travail stirs in me, that every man,  
It seems to me, saith :—' I abandon thee '—  
Observing how my aspect fades and pales.  
Whatever I may be, my Lady sees,  
And I hope yet in this to have her grace.

Go forth my piteous song thy weeping way  
And find the gentle souls, both young and old,  
To whom thy sister songs  
Were wont to bring delight ;  
And thou that art the daughter of my grief  
Go forth disconsolate to stay with them.

III. I speak  
piteously to  
the Ode.

The note of deep dejection which pervades the lament, its echo of long-continued grief, with the reiterated craving for Death, suggest a mourner who has withdrawn himself from profitable pursuits in surrender to his own sorrowful emotions. It seems probable that the overpowering sense of loss which accompanied the death of the maiden whom Dante loved finds expression here. But the wider meaning he had assigned to the name of Beatrice is unmistakably introduced into the Ode. Of no earthly maiden could it be said that her death proceeded from no physical cause, as of heat or cold; or that she was a great source of Salvation which went forth from God and was recalled by Him, too noble to be left in a distracted world.

Tears of penitence were alone fitting to mark a proper sense of the great withdrawal, and in every reference to Beatrice is mingled the sound of bitter weeping. Yet it is well to remember that the '*fletus*' or '*lacrymæ*', which recur so often in devotional exercises as the symbol of penitence, were interior, not exterior. Bonaventura lays great stress on this, pointing out that the visible act of weeping is often purely hypocritical. Dante found no image more suitable than tears to express the sense of guilt and sorrow roused by the passing of Beatrice. Those responsible for the disaster which had fallen upon the Church had no such emotion. They were unaware, because they had never known Him, that they had forfeited the Presence of the Son of God. Their minds were unable to form any image of the grace extended to mankind in the Blessed Sacrament.

It was fit and natural to lay stress in the lament on the personal sorrow occasioned by the death of Beatrice. But in the *Banquet* Dante took some pains to explain that his long mourning did not denote a period of inactivity in which his thoughts were morbidly centred on the loss sustained. It is evident from hints he supplied that these were strenuous years. It was owing to imperative reasons that he threw a fictitious air as of lovesickness over his mental processes. The prolonged travail of the soul, the agony of sighs of which he makes mention in the Ode, were, he here reveals, to be understood as the toil of study and the conflict of perplexities and doubts arising therefrom.<sup>1</sup> Tears obscure the vision and blur the objects contemplated. Thus they form a very good symbol for doubts which force their way into

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, 13; Bk. III, 12, 13.

the eyes of the intellect. The solitude to which he retired was the solitude of long nights spent in hard reading while others were resting. The eyes which he fixed gazing on the abiding place of His Love signify that intellectual concentration which in its highest form attained to speculation. Love at this time, he tells us, became a synonym for Study.

Deeply pondering over 'the words of authors, and of sciences and of books', he surrendered himself to the search for wisdom. And because the trend of these researches was to raise him above the thought of his first love to the recognition of Wisdom as the supreme thing, he was unable even in the *Banquet* to make more than the briefest allusion to the range of his studies. Only under the guise of a lover changing his allegiance from one noble Lady to another could he impart to his fellow-believers some hint of the intellectual labours involved in running counter to his former beliefs. He mentioned two only of the mystic books which helped to turn his thoughts to Heavenly Wisdom, the *Consolations* of Boethius and Cicero's treatise *On Friendship*. He pored over them intently, and says he found it hard at first to fathom their true import; 'Yet finally I penetrated into it so far as the skill in grammar which I possessed and a little of my own mother wit could bring me'. The *New Life* affords simple evidence that this new quest for wisdom was not, as some have supposed, the beginning of his acquaintance with classical literature. From early years he had been an omnivorous reader. But he had now embarked on a new quest, the search for traces of God's hidden Wisdom revealed to men of intellect in all ages and irrespective of creed. He had gained an inkling of a truth new to his generation, which opened up, as part of God's plan for the welfare of the world, the mind of the Greek, the Roman and the Arabian. These needed, he recognised, to be corrected and amplified by revelation accorded to Jewish prophets and Christian Apostles, but they betrayed through all imperfections the authentic marks of Divine inspiration.

Already, then, in the beginning of his search for the footprints of Heavenly Wisdom, the Holy Spirit of God, he came with joy upon the trail in the works of Boethius and Cicero. We see him ardently poring over every line which Virgil had written, adopting him for his master in diction and esoteric philosophy. In the schools of the Dominicans and Franciscans he studied the works of Augustine and other Christian

divines. He derived enlightenment and encouragement from the bulky manuscript tomes of Thomas Aquinas, the most modern and perhaps daring theologian of the day. He worked hard at the Latin texts of Aristotle, guided by the commentaries of the great Albert, who was the master of Thomas. He attended the discussions and listened to the sermons of many Lovers of Wisdom, including, it may be safely inferred, Apostles of the New Age.

And his researches led him further and further beyond the narrow dogmas imposed on him by ecclesiastical authority, which unhesitatingly condemned to fire unquenchable for all eternity many of those authors in whose works he could discern the Spirit of God.

He was well aware that many of his readers would find his language difficult of apprehension, but his contemporaries at any rate understood why he was compelled to disclose the state of his mind 'under the figure of other things'. They were in a position to appreciate the irony of his remark that 'no rhyme of the Vulgar Tongue was worthy to treat openly as a poet should' of the Lady he loved. For had he not just devoted chapter after chapter to defence of that very Vulgar Tongue, proving incontestably how 'the most lofty and most novel conceptions can be expressed in it well nigh as aptly, as adequately and as gracefully as in Latin itself'?<sup>1</sup> Everyone knew perfectly well that only the embargo laid by Rome on the issue in the vernacular of any serious work having a religious tendency hindered Dante from writing openly in Italian. No part of the policy of the Roman Curia was more obnoxious to him than this, and he did not scruple to rebuke in open terms the infamy of the evil men of Italy to whose blindness of discernment, disingenuous excuses, vainglory, envy and cowardice the contempt of the Italian language was due.

Under existing circumstances, then, he had to take into account that many of his readers were not well enough disposed to understand easily his words had they not been fictitious. Nor would they have given faith to the true meaning as they did to the fictitious one. He added ruefully: 'It was in very truth believed by all that I had been inclined to that [carnal] Love, which they did not believe of this'. Thus it came about that in his Lament over Beatrice the true import of his words could penetrate only to those

<sup>1</sup> *Danquet*, Bk. I, c. 10.

already prepared by studies, similar in kind though not in extent, to his own, to comprehend it.

A strange sense of isolation from his kind which accompanied the memory of the passing of Beatrice is expressed in the lament. A feeling of shame held him apart from other folk. His life had become for a time completely embittered. He imagined himself to be shunned by others. The ban of the suspect was as it were visibly hovering over his head. Nothing could sustain him in the thought of what might await him in the years to come but faith in that Power on high once vouchsafed in sacramental Presence to the apprehension of the devout.

There are some very perplexing things about Death in the dirge. The yearning for Death, whether excited by erotic or by religious passion, seems to pass beyond the bounds of due restraint. It is hard to believe it quite genuine. Many times he pondered, so he says, over the thought of Death, and was seized with such a longing for it that the very colour of his face was changed. And he recurs to this longing more than once. We venture once again to suggest that the word Death for him and his friends may have represented the orthodox Church. He declared in the *Banquet*<sup>1</sup> that to say a man is living means that he has the use of his reason. 'He who severs himself from the life of the mind, and hath only use of his sensitive part doth not live as a man.' It was precisely this use of reason which the Roman Church at that time practically, if never formally, forbade. Hence the allegorical use of the word 'Death' to express the slavish conformity of orthodoxy. It was an age in which the Catholic faith had become thickly encrusted with idle fables, offspring of ignorant tradition, and was still being further corrupted in a hundred ways from motives of avarice. Vulgar acts of imposture such as to make the gorge rise were not merely tolerated, but imposed on men's credulity by high authority. Examples have already been supplied of the kind of thing which men were being compelled to accept, and they explain why, for Dante and his like, surrender of the intellect to the Church meant its death. To discriminate, rejecting what was manifestly false while holding fast true Gospel teaching, was 'heresy'. The group of ecclesiastics who exercised powers from which there was no appeal were able to bring ruin and despair on all

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, c. 8.

who repudiated fictitious miracles or manufactured relics. To surrender to 'the Carnal Church', to stifle the voice of Reason, to cast forth doubts and aim at the unquestioning faith of childhood—this was the refuge sought by many in this age of terror. Many more, it may be conjectured, were driven to a bitter scepticism about religion as a whole. Either course meant the death of their higher part. 'One who should be so base is dead though he seem alive.' 'The corruption of the intellect cannot but lead to most foul death.' 'To renounce the exercise of reason is to renounce existence and thus become dead.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus the word 'Death' seems to have become a synonym for that death of the reasoning powers which was demanded of all who surrendered to authority. Even so, there were times when the thought of being restored to harmony with the Church seems to have visited Dante with a sense of unutterable sweetness. The victory of the 'old thought' meant that he might perhaps recover his former joy in worship, would feel himself once more in communion with the Church of his fathers, with every bright hope of the future renewed and all horror and shame as a 'suspect' wiped out; such a prospect might, indeed, overpower him with a gladness that caused the very colour of his face to change.

Section XXXIII.  
Death and  
the mourner.

The incident which furnished occasion for the succeeding sonnet and canzone, also part of the lament, is to be accepted like others in the *New Life* as a genuine occurrence woven into poetry, sometimes suggesting and always transfigured by the poet's own emotions. Accordingly it may be taken quite simply that when Dante had put forth the above beautiful canzone, it occasioned a desire among his friends for a continuance of the theme. One, who in degree of friendship stood only second to Guido Cavalcanti in his regard, appealed to him to write something on the death of a lady. So closely conjoined was this friend in kinship with the 'glorious being', that none was nearer to her than he. But he refrained from alluding to her, and 'disguised his words, so that it might seem that he was speaking of one who had recently died'. 'But', says Dante, 'perceiving that he spoke solely in respect of "that blessed one", I said I would do what his prayer asked of me.' The situation of the friend was in truth not dissimilar from that of Dante himself, when he composed the lament over Beatrice, for while ostensibly describing his sorrow for a lady recently dead, he had risen

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. IV, c. 7.

## THE LAMENT OVER BEATRICE

to a height which could only be justified by reference to a divine conception. No hint is given of the identity of this dearest but one of Dante's friends. May it not, indeed, have been a near relation of the gracious maiden herself whom Dante loved? Unquestionably a note of poignant personal sorrow shines through the lament, so vivifying it that many find it hard to credit the deeper meaning which the author plainly declared he had in mind. There is much to suggest that the life of this maiden, whether lived, as we have ventured to suggest, in the cloister, or elsewhere, came to a premature end at the time assigned by Dante to the passing of Beatrice. The friend is alluded to as her brother, and may very probably have been a monk.<sup>1</sup> To give certain information would have been dangerous and was far from the plan. We are led to guess that he was imbued with Joachist doctrines, and was noted for the deep affection and reverence he cherished for the Blessed Sacrament, as one who had dedicated himself with special ardour to this cult.

The sonnet which was the outcome of the request has a strangely frigid ring. Dante himself calls it 'but poor and bare service for one so closely conjoined with "the glorious one"'. The sighs of the mourners, of which the servants of Love are to penetrate the meaning, form the theme. We are once again to take note that such sighs indicate the toil of study and the strife of perplexities which rise in numerous ways. Piety (which often implies ecclesiastical authority) is bent on ascertaining the drift of his studies, and thus he hints at their purport to his loyal friends. These studies, he explains, are devoted to the past glories of the Presence now withdrawn to a more worthy realm, and this far oftener than his reason actually approves, though it brings him comfort. There were times when his studies drove him to a bitter realisation of life in his own times deprived of spiritual guidance, and he was then seized with a consciousness of being abandoned by the old assurance of Salvation.

VENITE A INTENDER LI SOSPIRI MIEI

Come penetrate the meaning of my sighs  
(Piety longs for it), O noble hearts.  
In travail comfortless they issue forth ;  
Yet were it not for them I'd die of grief.

Sonnet 17.

(1) I call on  
the loyal ser-  
vants of Love  
to understand  
me.

<sup>1</sup> The word *frate* or *fratello* may mean either monk or brother.



# THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

(2) I tell of  
my wretched  
state.

Although far oftener than I would have it so,  
My intellect, alas, would be to blame  
So to bewail my Lady (that is gone)  
That it might ease, bewailing her, my heart.  
Full often you will hear my sighs acclaim  
My noble Lady who hath been withdrawn  
To realm worthy of her essential grace ;  
And sometimes they disparage this our life  
In the person of the soul that sorroweth  
Forsaken thus by its Salvation.

Section  
xxxiv.

The sonnet serves as a prelude to the following Canzone 'in which', says Dante, 'two persons mourn, one of whom mourns as a brother (*fratello*) and the other as a worshipper (*servitore*)'. Yet both are in effect suffering from the same bereavement, for it is expressly stated that the friend was not in reality mourning for a mortal Lady, but was describing his grief at the departure from earth of the glorious and blessed being. In considering the two parts of this canzone 'subtly', as Dante said they ought to be considered, it would seem that the main difference between them lies in the attitude of the two speakers towards Death—the Roman Church. The first speaker surrenders to the thought of obtaining relief from the conflict through Death ; he envies all who succumb ; here he finds a soothing refuge from all burdens and obstacles. It is the voice of a mystic stifling all perplexities in submission to authority.

Ode 5.

In this my  
dear friend,  
close akin to  
her, makes  
lament.

QUANTUNQUE VOLTE, LASSO ! MI RIMEMBRA

How many times so'er the thought recurs  
That I may never more, alas, behold  
The Lady for whose sake I go thus sad,  
Such anguish doth my sorrow-laden mind  
Accumulate within my heart, I say :—  
' O soul of mine, why dost thou not escape ?  
' For the misfortunes thou shalt have to bear  
' In the age that hath already injured thee  
' Bring me foreboding and a direful fear '.  
Wherefore I call on Death  
As refuge calm and sweet, and say :—  
' Do thou come unto me ', with such great love  
That I am envious of all that die.

## THE LAMENT OVER BEATRICE

Within my toilsome sighs and travailing  
Comes swelling loud a sound of Piety  
That ever more goes clamouring for Death.  
When by Death's cruelty it came to pass  
My Lady was attacked, to *Her* were turned  
All my desires ;  
Because the pleasure of her loveliness  
In its withdrawing from our mortal sight  
Became a grand and spiritual beauty  
Diffusing through the Heaven the light of Love  
Which to the angels carries salutation,  
And makes their lofty rare intelligence  
To marvel at her great nobility.

In this I myself make  
lament.

The second speaker no less is tempted in the strife of his perplexities by the same 'sound of Pietà' which clamours for surrender. But the risen Beatrice is already leading his thoughts on to a higher plane. To *her*, not to Death (the feminine pronoun may indicate either), all his desires are turned. The concluding lines were assuredly never written of a mortal maiden. They testify to the presence in the student's mind, amid all the doubts and difficulties of his researches into truth, of an ever-deepening sense of reconciliation between his early phase of rapt unquestioning faith in the efficacy of the Blessed Sacrament for Salvation and the later revelation of the Gospel of Divine Love.

On the first anniversary of the day 'that this Lady had been made one of the citizens of eternal Life', Dante was sitting in a place where, in remembrance of her, he was drawing an angel on certain tablets. He turned his eyes to find that he was being watched by 'men to whom it is needful to pay honour', and discovered later that they had been watching him for some time without his being aware of it. When he perceived them, he rose, and greeting them observed, 'One other was but lately with me, and on that account I was deep in thought'. They left him and he resumed his work, continuing to draw figures of angels. Whereupon, being moved to compose a sonnet in honour of the anniversary, he addressed it to those who had been watching him, and took their visit for his theme.

Section xxxv.  
The Domi-  
ciliary Visit.

*First Beginning*

I say that this  
Lady was  
already in  
memory.

There had arisen in my memory  
The noble Lady who for her valiance  
Was elevated by the most high Lord  
Where Mary is—the Heaven of humbleness.

Having been interrupted, Dante began the sonnet anew as follows :

I say when  
this Lady rose  
up in my  
memory.

There had arisen in my memory  
That noble Lady Love lamenteth o'er,  
Just at the time when her great valiance  
Moved you to look on that which I was doing.

I say what  
Love on that  
account did  
to me.

Love, being ware of her within my mind,  
Had wakened up anew my wasted heart,  
And to my suspirations said :—‘ Go forth ’,  
So that each one distressful found a vent.

I tell of the  
effect of Love  
(1) How all  
my suspira-  
tions found  
utterance in  
speech.

Utterance they gained with tears from out my breast,  
One theme proclaiming—that which often brings  
Regretful tears into my sorrowing eyes.

(2) How  
some of these  
suspirations  
uttered words  
different from  
the others.

But those uttered with greater poignancy  
Came saying : ‘ O noble Intelligence,  
‘ A year to-day since thou didst rise to Heaven ’.

The incident narrated above, which gave rise to the sonnet with its double opening, appears on the face of it too slight to form its groundwork. Enough has been said of ecclesiastical procedure during these restless sceptical years to show, however, the probability of Dante having excited suspicion by the lyrics, handed about apparently as soon as written, in which he described the awakening in him of a new religious consciousness. The fact that he was watched as he sat at work, and was informed he had been long under secret observation, suggests that the Inquisition was on his track. He may have been actually drawing the figure of an angel, or he may have used this expression figuratively to denote his work on the theme of the *New Life*. In either case the domiciliary visit would run its usual course. All his

papers, including the partly finished sonnet, would be overhauled, probably confiscated for further investigation ; he would undergo a close interrogatory, possibly receive a stern warning. It would seem that the visit had been preceded by another, possibly from some acquaintance, now unmistakably revealed as a spy, feigning sympathy with his aspirations. Dante discovers himself wary, alert, undismayed. These officials, to whom it behoved him to show deference, however successful in working upon the fears of the ignorant, were unequal to the task of fencing with a supreme master of language, whether for the expression or the concealment of his thought. Once they were gone and he was again left in solitude, he was irresistibly drawn to make covert reference to their mission and weave the incident of their visit into the sonnet with which he had it in mind to commemorate the anniversary of the withdrawal of Beatrice from the world. It was hardly possible that Dante could elude the vigilance of the Holy Office. Both doctrinally and to some extent already politically he was in opposition to the Curia. At no time in his life can it be conceived of his free-ranging intellect that it would suffer itself to be confined within the limits of other men's opinions, and during these studious years his mind was in a ferment which must have betrayed itself to all who associated with him. In the terrible struggle for existence of an age in which starvation was the common nightmare of the needy scholar, bribes furnished a strong appeal, and false friends assuming the mask of heterodox opinion infested the councils of the initiates. Of such a false friend Guido Cavalcanti sent warning to Dante in a significant sonnet. He was to take heed if he met with Love in any place where Lapo happened to be, for often 'this sort' profess the semblance of true Love. There is a definite tradition that Dante was at one time in his life under suspicion of heresy, and the proceedings he described were precisely after the usual course. His visitors found him actually composing a hymn in praise of his Lady, who had passed from this world, and was now only accessible in the act of contemplation. He suffered the alarming visit to alter the sonnet already begun, and he completed it on rather a different note. The toilsome investigations into truth on which he had been long engaged were disguised under the name of sighs, or suspirations. Love bade him give them forth to the world, and this he was in act to do

## THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

when he was interrupted. So far from being intimidated he repeated emphatically the most dangerous of them all—the announcement that the noble Intelligence he hymned under the name of Beatrice had already risen to Heaven. This was to pronounce that the Age of the Son was ended—that the Roman hierarchy in the sight of God was dissolved.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE LADY AT THE WINDOW

THERE IS, we repeat, little doubt that a substratum of actual happenings underlies all the visions of the *New Life*. It is this which lends them their air of veracity and their unfailing lure. To deny the existence of the living maiden Beatrice is to strip the narrative of its charm. And this being so, it is hardly possible that there was no real Lady at the Window. We know, in fact, that some two or three years after the death of her whom he worshipped at a distance in early youth, another lady, young and no doubt beautiful, came to look upon him with love, was married to him and became the mother of his children. The groundwork of the *New Life* supposes an actual successor to his first love, a period of hesitation caused by dread of lightness of mind, and, at length, though this is more clearly indicated in the *Banquet* than in the *New Life*, a joyful surrender. As in the case of Beatrice, Gemma, if she be indeed the Lady at the Window, is little more than a shadow. It is her effect on Dante that is brought into view, and here we enter at once the realm of allegory. She serves as the symbol which marks his change of allegiance from one influence to another.

In all the allegorical writings of mediæval days, the imagery employed is derived in the first instance from the Bible, which, as Dr. Wicksteed pointed out, was considered to constitute a kind of Divine cipher. The interpretation was not arbitrary, but strictly traditional, founded on Augustine, Dionysius and others. In the Song of Solomon, for instance, when the Bride speaks to her spouse, it is the Church which calls to Christ, and this particular image was very popular with mystic writers. 'Behold', she cries, 'he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice'.<sup>1</sup> It is thus that the soul first beholds the faint image, half hidden by material

Section  
xxxvi.

<sup>1</sup> *Cant.*, ii, 9. En ipse stat post parietem nostrum, respiciens per finestras.

preoccupations, of the Holy Spirit. Carrying on the same thought the Apostle had declared that 'now we see through a Window above, as though in an enigma, but then face to face'.<sup>1</sup> In a later epistle the Apostle recurred to this image: 'We all, with open face *beholding as in a glass* (Vulg. *speculantes*) the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory by the *Spirit of the Lord*'. It was thus 'through a window above' that Dante presented that image of a Lady which was to succeed the vanished Beatrice.

According to the narrative of the *New Life*, Dante became aware of the new Lady quite suddenly. He was in a place which reminded him of past times. Full of melancholy thoughts which produced in him signs of dreadful mental perturbation, he raised his eyes (towards Heaven), to see if any took note of his distress. Thereupon he perceived a Lady, young and most beautiful, who was watching him from a Window, to all appearance most pitifully, indeed in such a way that all pity (all piety) seemed to be united in her. Of a sudden the tears came into his eyes, and fearing lest he should disclose the baseness of his life, he withdrew from the eyes of the Lady, saying in his own mind:—'It cannot but be that the highest Love is with this pitiful Lady'.

The time when this encounter took place is only vaguely indicated as 'some time after'. In the *New Life*, as in all works which deal with the minute analysis of emotion, time is often slowed down or accelerated; it can never be measured by the normal passage of hours. 'Some time after' indicates sequence, not duration. In the *Banquet*, however, Dante gave further particulars, and intimated that an intensive course of study and meditation extending over a period of two and a half years had preceded the first distinct revelation of the Lady. When he set himself to recall his spiritual adventures he seems to have picked out the moments which proved as it were signposts along the path of his search for truth. Of these the most heartening and vital of all was the moment when as in a vision there flashed through to his heart that Unction of the Holy Ghost, fore-

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor., xiii, 12. Vulg. Videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate. A.V. Now we see through a *glass darkly*. See Ducange. 'Speculum' or 'specular' was a window protected with slats or lattice and usually some distance from the ground. The word is intimately connected with the verb 'speculare', and thus also with the act of speculation.

ordained to be the Comforter of the Christian, after the Ascension of the Lord.

Intimate personal guidance of the individual soul by the Holy Spirit did not at this period enter very clearly into the teaching of the Church. The promise of the Spirit was claimed as the special prerogative of the Church in its corporate capacity. His guidance was held to justify every innovation, render the Pope infallible, and set the entire hierarchy above criticism or complaint. The Christian, though endued with the Holy Ghost in Baptism and Confirmation, was not encouraged to rely on this source of strength for guidance. To be 'led by the Spirit' savoured of presumption in the layman. In that direction lay liberty of conscience, and the Church sternly proclaimed its challenge to this menace through the Inquisition Courts. Christians were required to leave the direction of their souls to the priest. They must pay their dues, confess their sins, submit to penance, attend Mass. There was no room in the system as popularly administered in these times for the voice of the free Spirit to the individual soul. 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.' But liberty was anathema. To believe in the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit was the hallmark of the heretic. Thus it was of necessity under a deep veil of secrecy that Dante introduced this image. Even when he expounded the allegory ten or twelve years later, he did not dare to say openly that the Influence now supreme in his heart was the manifestation of the Spirit. He called it first Philosophy, and next Love of Wisdom. Without doubt a Divine Influence, even when disguised under the habit of Philosophy, for the Love of Wisdom 'exists supremely in God'—nay, more than Divine, for this Being is the Spouse of the Emperor of Heaven, and not only Spouse but Sister and most beloved Daughter. Such words could not rightly be applied to any but the Deity in Person.

It was the earnest endeavour of Joachim and of all his followers, esteemed for half a century devout and orthodox Churchmen, to shift the centre of gravity in Christianity from the Sacrifice of the Mass to the promised Unction of the Holy Spirit. The carnal element in the Church had captured and debased that part of the Christian religion which centred round the Holy Eucharist. Convinced that Christ had in consequence withdrawn His actual Presence in the Mass from mankind, devout men transferred their hopes to



# THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

the promised Paraclete. Under the figure of the Lady at the Window we reach the core of the New Life, the perception of the radiant light shed by the Spirit into the humble heart. In the successive sonnets which describe the Lady, always beheld it would seem 'at the Window', *i.e.* in the act of *speculation*, successive phases are brought under review as they became gradually visible to the eye of faith.

Sonnet 19.

VIDERO GLI OCCHI MIEI QUANTA PIETATE

Mine eyes beheld what wealth of tender sorrow  
 Became apparent in your countenance  
 When gazing on the actions and the state  
 To which I oftentimes was brought by grief.  
 Then I took note that you reflected on  
 The quality of my o'ershadowed life.  
 So that there smote into my heart the dread  
 Of shewing through mine eyes my cowardice.  
 And I withdrew me from you, being ware  
 The tears were loosened rising from my heart  
 Which had arisen at the sight of you.  
 Afterwards in my mournful soul I said :—  
 ' Verily with this Lady is that Love  
 ' Which maketh me thus weeping go my way '.

Always he had felt assured that this Gift was imperishable, and in a recent sonnet he had affirmed his conviction that in vanishing from our sight ' the joy of her beauty turns to a great *spiritual* loveliness which fills the heavens with the light of Love '. Although the gladness of fulfilment begins to inspire the song, though all that he had dreamed of Beatrice, his highest hopes and aspirations, were to find fruition in the new Influence, for the moment he weeps. Beholding under this ray of illumination its own forlorn state, the soul withdrew to bewail its unworthiness.

Section

xxxvii.

Sonnet 20.

COLOR D'AMORE, E DI PIETÀ SEMBIANTI.

The look of Love, semblance of Piety,  
 Never before suffused the face of Lady  
 So wonderfully at the constant sight  
 Of trustful eyes and weeping dolorous  
 As now your countenance reveals, whene'er  
 You fix your gaze upon my quivering lips.

## THE LADY AT THE WINDOW

So that there cometh to my mind through you  
A thing I sorely dread may break my heart.  
I cannot turn aside my wasted eyes  
That may not look upon you oftentimes  
For the great longing that they have to weep.  
And you so stimulate in them free will  
They are utterly consumed of this desire.  
But with you nigh they know not how to weep.

The spiritual comfort instilled into the heart deepened. Its identity with the revelation of God vouchsafed of old by Christ through the Holy Eucharist further developed. There was the same satisfying conviction of a Love which stoops to seek out the suppliant. He became increasingly confident, cheered by the signs of God's indwelling Love which formerly had brought him consolation.

An agony of penitence swept over the soul. The Spirituals rejected the whole armoury of confession and penance, yet not on that account did they take sin lightly. They set their minds to attain a far higher standard of conduct than that so painfully and ineffectually enforced by the Church, and not in vain, for their enemies have borne abundant witness to their holiness. They strove to attune their lives to entire purity, and this with a fervour which rendered the very entrance into the mind of an evil thought a calamity. Even while filled with the joy of the new influence Dante expressed his sense of a deep misgiving. There was something, not specified, which he feared was lying in wait to seize his heart, to snatch it from him as it were by force.

So far it is comparatively easy to follow the train of thought. It is possible that in the eyes of the writer it appeared too easy. He had ceased to mourn for what had passed. He had surrendered to a new Influence, which yet was grounded on, and to some extent in harmony with, the old. It might have been left at that. It is, in fact, at this conclusion that the final chapter of the *New Life* arrives, wherein the New Intelligence draws him upward to a purer understanding of the most noble Beatrice, and leaves him inspired with the purpose of proclaiming to the world a new and more spiritual conception of Christianity.

But the influence of the Lady at the Window did not at once overcome a fervid yearning for the old beliefs. There

was a continuous mental struggle, often accompanied by suspicion as to the genuineness of the message conveyed to his intellect through the act of speculation. The idea of disloyalty to the Church of his fathers, the Church of Augustine and the saints, stirred in him deep unhappiness. He found himself sharply divided between the old and the new conception of truth, and he dramatised the situation, assigning to his heart the office of defending the old, while the eyes or intellect took the part of the new Influence. It is a very important passage in the elucidation of the allegory.

‘I came in such case through the sight of this Lady that my eyes began to delight too much to behold her ; so that many times I was tormented about it in my heart, and deemed myself truly despicable. And many times I cursed the lack of steadiness in my eyes, and said to them in my thoughts :—“ Once you used to make those weep who beheld your sorrowful state, and now it seems you want to forget it on account of this Lady who regards you, and who would not so regard you at all were it not that she is sore afflicted for the glorious Lady for whom you used to weep. But do the best you can—for I will remind you of her full often, ye eyes accursed ; for never till death itself ought your tears to have been stayed ”. And when I had thus spoken within myself to my eyes, sighs most deep and full of anguish assailed me. And to the end that this battle which I waged within me should not remain known only to the wretched being who experienced it, I proposed to make a sonnet and to comprehend in it the horror of this condition of mind.’

## Sonnet 21.

The heart  
speaks  
(1) I speak of  
mine eyes as  
my heart  
spoke in  
myself.

## L'ANARO LAGRIMAR CHE VOI FACESTE

O eyes of mine, the bitter tears you shed,  
And have done for so long a season past,  
Were wont to rouse like tears of Piety,  
As you have well perceived in other folk,  
You would forget her now, it seems to me,  
Had I become on my part so disloyal  
As not to wrest from you every excuse  
By bringing her to mind for whom you wept.  
I ponder o'er your lack of steadfastness  
Which has me such affright that I dread sore  
of a Lady gazing on you.

## THE LADY AT THE WINDOW

Never except through Death should you forget  
Our Lady who is dead.  
Thus saith my heart, and afterwards doth sigh.

(2) I remove  
a certain  
doubt by  
showing who  
it is that thus  
speaks.

In the act of contemplation the eyes of the Intellect meet the gaze of the Lady, figure of Divine Wisdom which is the 'brightness of the eternal Light, the spotless mirror of the majesty of God'.<sup>1</sup>

But in this remarkable sonnet Dante's heart is reproaching the higher faculty of intellect because it seems to draw him away from the old-established forms of worship which he still loved. The word 'thought' is often used for 'part of the contents of the mind', and thought with assent<sup>2</sup> is synonymous with 'belief'. The battle of contrary thoughts is thus the battle between opposite beliefs.

The battle of beliefs is described in far greater detail in the *Banquet*, where its psychology is analysed. The old thought or belief had its stronghold in his heart. The new thought communicated itself to the Intellect or Eyes of the mind. Intense concentration of the mind led him further and further from the fervent thoughts formerly inspired in him by Beatrice. The meeting-ground of the contending forces in his inmost being or soul provoked an outbreak of anguished sighs which, so he explained, were to be understood as doubts. Thus the old loyalties, contending against the new perceptions of truth, went on pleading their cause, overwhelming the soul with dismay until the very foundations of belief began to give way.

So might some ardent seekers after truth pledged to acceptance of a Bible divinely inspired in every line have wrestled with their faith when confronted with the testimony of the rocks and the discoveries of Darwin. So is a contest everlasting renewed in religion, in politics, in science, whenever a new understanding breaks up opinions hitherto cherished with ardour.

It seems very clear that Dante desired it to be known that he did not cast off allegiance to the Church lightly and without a struggle. Here and in the *Banquet* he took pains to justify himself, lest those who came after him might reprove

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. III, c. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. II, c. 7. This soul is nought else but another thought accompanied by assent, which, repelling the former, commends and exalts the memory of Beatrice in glory.

him for 'lightness of mind' when they heard he had changed from his first Love.<sup>1</sup> His only and complete justification lay in the nature of the Lady who had brought about the change. So supreme her power (*Virtù*) none can offer resistance; at her disposition the settled strength of the soul is moulded and changed. The new influence revealed itself as Authentic and Divine by virtue of being irresistible.

Section  
xxxix.

The scene changes to unfold a fresh mental conflict, in which, for purposes of mystification it may be surmised, victory seems to rest with the old belief instead of with the new. Many Dante scholars whose judgment commands respect have taken the enigmatic sonnets '*Gentil Pensiero*' and '*Lasso per forza*', with their obscure preambles, to indicate that, being tempted to forgetfulness of Beatrice by the Lady at the Window, Dante succeeded, after great distress of mind, in freeing himself from the new influence and thus returned to his old allegiance. Against this interpretation there is his express intimation in the *Banquet* that on the contrary he surrendered himself completely and permanently to the new Lady. Moreover, in the very passage in the *New Life* which bewilders the issue (the preamble to '*Gentil Pensiero*'), he definitely declared that in the 'Battle of Thoughts' those that pleaded for Her whose eyes had shown so much compassion (*i.e.* the new Lady) won the victory. The preamble begins:

'The sight of the Lady inclined me to such a new condition that many times I thought about her as of a person who delighted me to excess. And I thought of her in this way:—"This is a noble Lady, beautiful, young and wise, who has appeared, it may be by the will of Love, for the consolation of my life". And many times I thought even more tenderly so that my heart acquiesced in it, that is in my reasoning.'

To understand Dante's misgivings about the pleasure he took in the act of speculation and its exceeding sweetness, it is necessary to have some acquaintance with the mystic mode of thought. In the early stages of the 'interior life', all mystic writers recognise that there is danger of being lulled in a kind of half-sensuous delight which saps all energy and leads to a self-indulgent quietism. After such anguish of mind as has been described this phase was not

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. III, c. 1.

infrequent. Many religious minds spent themselves in pleasurable, half-amorous musings, which gave relief from the cruelties of existence. In modern parlance this outer fringe of mysticism is sometimes known as the cosmic sense, and is enjoyed by many who, like W. H. Hudson, had no part nor lot in theological systems. By monks of old it was considered a snare for the unwary.

Dissecting his impressions Dante discovered that the part of him which reacted most joyously to the comfort of the new Lady was his heart. This organ he defined as the 'secret inner sanctuary of his being', an expression which seems to make the heart correspond with the 'ego' or self-hood. In the heart lay the stronghold of the 'old belief', and the fact that the consolation he received from the Lady at the Window was in harmony with the old thought, did indeed bring back to him memories of happy communion, made it the more precious.

But the suggestion that the new Lady had appeared so that his life should enjoy repose was suspect. It was in fact a temptation. The preamble continues :

'And when it (my heart) had consented to this I began to consider again, as though moved by Reason, and said within myself :—" Ah, what thought is this which seeks in such base fashion to console me, and hardly suffers me to think of aught besides ".'

In the esoteric sense, he tells us, Reason stands for the soul—the immortal essence as contrasted with the mortal self. This high strand in his being awoke to realise what unworthy conception of the spiritual life was being cherished by self. Not as a solace, offering comfortable repose, but as a spur to high endurance was the unction of the spirit to be received. The soul suspected, and rightly, any aspect of inspiration, however alluring, which excluded reflection and centred the mind on itself. But the battle was not ended :

Preamble. 'Thereupon another thought rose up again and said :—" Now since thou hast been in so great tribulation, why wilt thou not withdraw thyself from such bitterness ? Thou seest that this is an inspiration which recalls to our mind the desires of Love, and is set stirring from that most noble place whence are the eyes of the Lady who has shown herself so pitiful towards thee ".'

The heart has now disclosed the root of the whole matter. 'Surely I have suffered enough; why not withdraw myself from all this bitterness?' This was the real temptation which assailed Dante during this battle of thoughts. Not the grace of the new Lady contending against the memory of Beatrice, but the longing to end the bitter contest which was to fill his entire life, the longing to conform outwardly and leave the Curia to work out its own designs, while, in some quiet retreat, cheered by his wife and family, and the inward consolations they symbolised, he himself passed peaceful days in study. This seems to be the '*Gentil Pensiero*', which the higher part of his being rejected as '*vilissimo*', even though the subject of it be admittedly noble. The Heart or Self pleaded truthfully the heavenly source of that consolation which streamed in upon his soul, the Divine compassion which had so often eased his griefs. The thought of withdrawal from all this bitterness returned insistently, dominating all others, urging perhaps the uselessness of striving against the irresistible power of the carnal Church, painting the joys of an existence which ignored the sorrows of his countrymen and made a little Paradise for itself. Whether it could ever have been realised under the conditions of the times is another matter. It is clear from what follows that Dante rejected the temptation, and turned to grapple with the evils which lay at his door. Meantime he desired 'to utter some further words about it'.

## Sonnet 22.

## GENTIL PENSIERO, CHE PARLA DI VUI

(1) I begin to say to this Lady how my desire is turned wholly to her.

(2) I say how the Soul, that is Reason, speaks to the heart, that is to the appetite.

(3) I say how the heart replies to the soul.

[Observe the singular—the proffer was to self not to soul.]

Noble temptation telling me of you  
Cometh full often to abide with me;  
And speaketh so enchantingly of Love  
It maketh all my heart assent thereto.  
The soul speaks to the heart:—'What thought is this  
'That cometh to bring comfort to our mind,  
'So all-prevailing in its potency  
'It lets no other thought abide with us?'  
The heart replies:—'O soul that pondereth,  
'This is a new inspiring come from Love  
'That proffereth *before me* his desires;  
'The life thereof and all its efficacy  
Sprang from the eyes of Her most pitiful  
'Moved by compassion for *our* martyrdom.'

The preceding sonnet closes on a particular thought about which the heart and soul, self and intellect, were in conflict. It is revealed in the preamble, though not in the sonnet, that the subtle 'adversary of Reason' was a persistent temptation to seek repose in the sweetness of the Divine Wisdom, and withdraw altogether from the bitter conflict. Such a temptation had its proper place in the apologia which was to justify Dante's change of allegiance from the Church, and there is no room for doubt that it was a genuine experience. It caused him for some time to hesitate, and the mode in which it was finally overcome illustrates the distinctive unifying quality of Dante's religious convictions. It happened as follows :

Preamble. 'Against this *adversary of reason* there arose one day almost in the hour of noon a mighty vision within me ; for I thought I saw the glorious Beatrice in those garments of the hue of blood in which she first appeared to my eyes, and she seemed to me youthful, the same age as when I first saw her ; and remembering her according to the sequence of time past, my heart began sorrowfully to repent of the longing by which it had so basely allowed itself to be possessed for some days in opposition to the constancy of Reason. And when I cast forth this evil desire, all my thoughts returned to this most noble Beatrice. And I say that from that time on I began to think about her with a heart so full of shame as my sighs many a time made evident. For they nearly all uttered as they went forth what was being spoken in my heart, that is, the name of that most noble Lady and how she departed from us. And many times it happened that some thought held me in such pain that I forgot both it and where I was.'

Owing to the fact that Dante's religious life had centred round the Eucharist, the profanation of the Holy Rite was the immediate cause which threw him into opposition to the Carnal Church. The vision of Divine Wisdom, so passing sweet in its demonstration and persuasions, for a short time tempted him to abandon the struggle and rest content with abstracting his mind from ecclesiastical abuses. But while he dallied with this thought, suddenly, at noon, a time which symbolises the culmination of spiritual light, he was visited by one of those extraordinarily vivid imaginations which are



not infrequent in mystic narratives. It was a vision of Beatrice as she had appeared to him in his youth, in that garment of blood-red hue which revealed her as a reflection of the Saviour of mankind. With the recollection of all that had gone before, Dante recovered, as though galvanised by an electric shock, the grief and indignation which once possessed his soul against the Carnal Church. He saw it with renewed force as guilty of crucifying afresh the Lord of Glory and banishing from mankind the Holy Gift of the Lord's Presence. The alluring thought of enjoying ease and contentment in a world thus turned awry vanished. A great wave of prophetic insight swept over him in which he attained to a realisation of the anguish he would himself be called to endure. One thought in particular he tells us, held him spellbound, often unconscious of his surroundings. Was it the perception that martyrdom itself, torture or dungeon worse than death, might have to be faced? It was in this terrible state of mental distress that he finally cast forth from him the 'base desire' of abandoning the contest.

The immediate result of this great tribulation was to cut him off altogether for a time from the joys of communion with the Spirit. The eyes of intuition were blinded. The voice of Divine Wisdom was for a season stilled.

Sonnet 22.

Preamble. 'On account of this renewal of sighs, the weeping which had begun to abate burst forth again so that my eyes seemed two things whose only longing was to weep. And often it happened that from long continuing of tears there came round them a dark colour which is wont to appear when some torture has been inflicted. Hence it seems that they were fitly recompensed for their lack of steadfastness, in that from henceforth they could not look on any one who should so gaze on them as to have the power to raise in them a similar intent.

'Whereupon, intending that such an *unworthy longing* and *idle temptation* should appear to be altogether abolished, and that the words in rhyme which I had composed before should not be productive of any doubt, I proposed to make a sonnet wherein I should comprehend the substance of this reasoning, and then I composed :—'

## THE LADY AT THE WINDOW

LASSO! PER FORZA DE' MOLTI SOSPIRI

Alas, the eyes of intellect are conquered  
 By the great might of many doubting sighs,  
 Which spring from out beliefs within the heart ;  
 They have no valour left to contemplate  
 The being gazing on them from above.  
 It seems these eyes have turned to two desires—  
 Both to shed tears and to display my grief ;  
 And many times so bitterly they weep  
 Love doth encircle them with martyr's crown.  
 Such like beliefs and the utterances I breathe  
 Turn to such dreadful anguish in my heart  
 That Love half faints, so doth he grieve thereat,  
 Because these mournful thoughts hold fast inscribed  
 That sweet name of my Lady  
 And many words beside about her death.

I said ' alas '  
 in that I was  
 ashamed that  
 mine eyes had  
 thus idly  
 deceived me.  
 I divide not  
 this sonnet  
 because its  
 theme is suffi-  
 ciently  
 evident.

The return to weeping and sighs portends a full renunciation of the life of ease. In mystic writing tears [interior, not visible] are the evidence of grief provoked by evil rulers who openly profane God's laws.<sup>1</sup> To his sorrowing heart, weakly inclined to succumb to the allurements of retreat from hard things, the answer came in renewed tribulation. The curious bit of imagery relating to the condition of his eyes may have been suggested to Dante by an actual attack of inflammation which, so we learn from the *Banquet*, affected them about this time. It would be quite in accord with his method to allegorise such an actual occurrence. The inner meaning is fairly obvious. The interior eye becomes obscured when the heart nurses thoughts of anger and hatred. The remedy prescribed by Augustine<sup>2</sup> was ' the biting precept, " Love thine enemies " '.<sup>3</sup> Dante used the simile, it may be surmised, with the express purpose of introducing an allusion to the ghastly

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ramon Lull, *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, p. 50. ' The Beloved drew near to the Lover to comfort and console him for the grief which he suffered, and the tears which he shed. And the nearer was the Lover to the Beloved, the more he grieved and wept, crying out upon the dishonour which his Beloved endured.

<sup>2</sup> *Aug. iv*, 771 d; *Rev. iii*, 18. ' Anoint the eye with eye-salve that ye may see.' The word ' eye-salve ' in the Vulgate is *collyrium*. Now the effect of using collyrium is to make black circles round the eyes. Horace. Cf. *Aug. iv*, 254: ' The eye of the mind is to be healed with collyrium '.

appearance of suspected heretics after undergoing torture. But in the sonnet he very beautifully transformed this brutal touch to the conception of a crown of martyrdom with which Love itself, the Love of Christ, encircles His Lovers. In these impassioned dreams and visions one is never very far from the horrible cruelties of the times. We are to understand that the abominable persecutions of the saints filled him with such deep indignation as to hide from his eyes the rays of Divine Wisdom. His mind was once more filled with horror. The name of Beatrice, ever with him, brought poignant recollections of the villanies which had driven her from earth.

There is a suggestion of a special campaign of persecution, possibly accompanied by the seizure and torture of some among the intimates of Dante. In the succeeding chapter the episode which roused in him such overwhelming distress of mind is alluded to as 'this tribulation', the very name employed, by Angelo da Clareno, to describe the successive outbursts of persecution to which the Franciscans and other spiritually minded men were exposed by the Inquisition.

Thus closed the 'Battle of Thoughts'. Under one aspect it conveyed the impression that it was a battle between the influence of the Lady at the Window and Beatrice, between the new belief and the old. Sometimes one of these was uppermost, sometimes the other. His heart was set on the old faith and forms of worship, his interior vision, the eyes of the mind, were subjugated by the new Spiritual influence. On closer scrutiny this particular contest resolves itself into the foiling of an unworthy temptation to withdraw from resistance to ecclesiastical authority and seek peace without honour. Written under a cloud of suspicion that he was himself a partaker in the aspirations of the Spirituals, the language was inevitably guarded to the point of obscurity. The Inquisition officials racked their brains to discover the secrets of the mystical language employed by the men they persecuted; they probably followed it with considerable success, and were ready to damn as heretical the supposition that any new influence could supplant what had previously been adored. It may have been essential to safety, it was certainly essential to the artistic unity of the work, that the *New Life* should end on the note of loyal fidelity to the memory of Beatrice. This nevertheless was entirely compatible with the inner and secret meaning, for remembrance

## THE LADY AT THE WINDOW

of her death was intimately bound up with indignation at the system deemed responsible for it. The temptation to secure personal ease and quiet by outward conformity may have been effectually destroyed by the renewed agonies inflicted upon his friends.

## CHAPTER XVI

### CLOSE OF THE SECOND AGE

WITH THE tribulation which circled the eyes of Dante with the shadow of a martyr's crown the narrative is well nigh at an end. The *New Life*, being wholly dedicated to Beatrice and the reaction upon Dante's beliefs of her withdrawal from earth, could not appropriately follow out the development of the New Intelligence. 'They that pleaded for her (the Lady of Compassion) had won the battle of the thoughts', and the future lay with the Spiritual Wisdom revealed through the medium of Love. Yet it was needful in closing the theme of Beatrice to face certain consequences bound up in the passing of the Second Age. Foremost in the minds of all was the great problem of Rome. What effect would the disappearance of its miraculous status have upon Rome, visible centre of Christianity and the Catholic Church? Assuredly, thought many of the Spirituals, the effect could not be less than that produced upon Jerusalem by the close of the First Age with the advent of the Son of God. Their minds, saturated with visions from the Apocalypse, nursed extravagant expectations. There would seem to be no trace of these over-sanguine hopes in the *New Life*. In their place we get a picture of the callous indifference displayed in Rome itself by those most nearly concerned in the withdrawal of Beatrice.

It came to pass, he tells us, that he watched a group of pilgrims passing along a road 'nearly in the middle of the city wherein the most noble Lady was born, lived and died'. 'The time was that in which many people go to see that blessed image which Jesus Christ left us as an ensample of His most beautiful Countenance.' The Veronica (*vera ikon*) exhibited only at Christmas and Easter was among the most celebrated treasures at St. Peter's in Rome, and the natural inference is that these pilgrims had come to the city of Rome in order to see it. Moreover, it is intimated, in a digression which seems to have been thrown in for this express purpose,

that the sorrowing city was Rome. For though, in a wide sense, we are told, the word pilgrim merely means one who is away from his own country, yet in a strict sense men are called palmers when they go to and from places whence they bring back palms, pilgrims when they visit the shrine of St. James of Compostella, and 'romei' or romers when they journey to Rome, and this is where these who are called *pilgrims* were going'. The sorrowful City has already in previous passages of the *New Life* been identified with Rome. Here the most noble Lady, the Catholic Church with all its rites, had its origin. From this City she passed when God translated her from a world no longer worthy to enshrine so noble a thing. Rome was, in effect, the Jerusalem of the Second Age.

Dante was particularly struck with the fact, of which he probably had personal knowledge, that the ignorant crowd of pilgrims had actually no perception at all of the great mystery of the Christian faith. Their very faces betrayed their remoteness from any sacred associations with the places they visited. Indeed, 'barbarians', baptised by priests who possessed scanty, if any, knowledge of their 'converts' language, can have had but the vaguest notion of Christianity. Wholly preoccupied about their own affairs, they appeared to be such a crowd as the prophet of old had in mind when he uttered the world-famous lament over Jerusalem which echoes through the *New Life* from beginning to end: 'Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me. . . .'

As Dante noted the utter indifference of the ignorant strangers, he perceived in it a parallel with that of grave dignitaries; they also, so it seemed, had no understanding of the grave condition of the City. The Christian priests, for whom the Blessed Sacrament should have been dearer than life itself, presented the same indifference in Dante's eyes to the deprivation which had befallen the City. 'Among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her'.

Sick at heart in contemplation of the callous infidelity of high personages in Rome, it came to Dante that had he only power to unfold to these foreign pilgrims the love of Christ to His Church, and how basely her ministers had betrayed Him, he could stir all hearts to penitence and love. After his usual custom, he threw into dramatic form the vivid imagination stirred in him by the sight of these men.

## THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

Feigning himself to be actually addressing them, he wrote the following sonnet, with the design, it would appear, of declaring that the barbarians were more open to religious perceptions, when properly instructed, than Roman priests. The departure of Beatrice had made no difference whatever to Rome. That seems to be the gist of the incident and of the sonnet.

Sonnet 23.

DEH PEREGRINI, CHE PENSOSI ANDATE

Ah, pilgrims, who pass on thus heavily  
Thinking mayhap of aught but what ye see,  
Come ye from such far-distant race of men  
As in your aspect you display to us ?  
For ye weep not while you are passing by  
Right through the midst of the afflicted City;  
E'en like those personages who appear  
In no degree to comprehend her woe.  
Would you but halt, would you but hear it told,  
My sighing heart assures me verily  
That you would then pursue your way in tears.  
The sorrowing City hath lost its Beatrice ;  
The words a man might say concerning her  
Possess the power to make other men weep.

Section XLII.

' Then two noble souls sent to beg me to send them some of these my words in rhyme. Whereupon, bearing in mind their nobleness, I decided that I would send to them, and that I would compose a new thing which I would send them with those words so that I might accede the more courteously to their prayers. And I then composed a sonnet which tells of my condition, and sent it to them, accompanied by another which begins " Come and get understanding of my sighs ". The sonnet which I then composed is " Beyond the Sphere ".'

Regarded as a whole, the collection of poems and prose comments known as the *New Life* contains a vindication of Dante's early faith, ending with a demonstration of its inherent harmony with the New Intelligence of Divine truth to which he had now after great stress of mind attained.

Every radical alteration which a man may make in his political opinions, or his religious faith, is liable to bring on

him the censure of his fellows, and thus set stirring in him an impulse towards such an examination of the past as may serve to justify the change. The deeper a man's nature, the more violent the upheaval occasioned throughout his whole being by an alteration in belief. The mind seeks earnestly to discover in what, if at all, it erred in holding the original belief; to what extent, if any, former convictions of truth are in harmony with the all-powerful new belief which has superseded them. Much more was involved in this enquiry than the truth of certain abstract dogmas. It concerned nothing less than the genuineness of that Divine part of the mind alluded to variously by mystics as the Divine Nucleus, the Apex, the Ground or Basis, the Spark or Nobility of the Soul, the Divine Seed, the point of contact between God and the human mind, the Divine Gift which makes union possible between man and the Deity.

Dante seems to imply in the *New Life* that he first waked to a perception of the Divine Spark within him at his First Communion, and that for years he was conscious in the Holy Eucharist alone of its possession. These early religious perceptions were entirely bound up in his mind with other doctrines of the Catholic Faith, unquestioningly received and loyally cherished. Then came the awakening to philosophy, to Franciscan ideals, to doubts suggested by observation of the religious system as enforced by Rome. There followed deep researches into the history of the older Fathers of the Church, and into modern works, some by men who were at variance with Rome. Thus he gained first-hand acquaintance with all the seething ideas of liberty and reform then being uttered with bated breath, in secret, at peril of men's lives. Holding fast through these years his loyalty to the revelation of the Deity vouchsafed him in early moments of worship, Dante came in the end to grasp a New Intelligence of Love, and discovered in the Scriptures over which he pored unceasingly such prophecies and promises of enlightenment through the Holy Spirit as completely altered the character of his religion. In the practice of contemplation he attained once more and with far deeper felicity to union with God. And finally he began to realise that the New Intelligence was in absolute harmony with that Divine Presence to which he had of old given the name of 'Beatrice'. The horror he had experienced when convinced for a time



that he had been deceived and mocked by a simulacrum of truth vanished, although his indignation against false Sacramental doctrine remained acute. He stretched upwards in a movement of the mind which transcended all earthly limits, to find 'the One which is beyond thought and surpasses the apprehension of thought, the Good which is beyond utterance and surpasses the reach of words'. There amid the incommunicable utterances, distinguished by the pilgrim soul, he became aware of the Divine whisper of the Blessed Gift. In all the glory of a new Inspiration, a greater Illumination, he knew the risen and glorified Apex of the Soul to be none other than Beatrice, the guiding star of his youth.

This, then, was the message he desired to despatch to those noble souls, men of high consideration in the mystic way, who asked him for the tale of his experiences. It is noteworthy that in his final sonnet Dante provided a really enlightening comment, setting out in a kind of paraphrase the meaning he attached to each line. To read the verse and comment side by side, as he desired his contemporaries in the mystic way to do, is to be certified of the spiritual nature of the Love which had guided him. It is plainly revealed as the Love which finds fruition only in the exercise of the thing it loves most. And what it loves most is that nobility of the intellect which leads the Soul upwards in contemplation to become partaker of the supreme blessedness, union with God.

## Sonnet 24.

## OLTRE LA SPERA, CHE PIÙ LARGA GIRA

The five  
parts :

(1) I say  
where my  
thought  
goeth, nam-  
ing it by the  
name of one  
of its effects.

(2) I say why  
it goeth up-  
ward ; who  
maketh it go.

(3) I say what it sees, an honoured Lady ; and I call it then a pilgrim's spirit inasmuch as it goeth spiritually and like a pilgrim outside his fatherland.

Beyond the sphere that circleth most wide  
Passes the aspiration from my heart ;

A New Intelligence, which Love with tears  
Set in my heart, impels it upward still.  
When it has come whither it yearns to be,

It sees a Lady who receiveth honour ;  
So clear she shines, that by her splendour lit  
The spirit breaketh bounds to gaze on her.

## CLOSE OF THE SECOND AGE

When it recounts how glorious she appears  
I understand not what it subtly speaks  
To the sad heart, that urgeth it to speak.

I know it speaks of that most noble Gift,  
For often it recalleth Beatrice.  
Thus well I understand it, noble souls.

(4) I say how  
it sees her  
such, i.e. in  
such essence  
that I cannot  
understand  
it; my  
thought rises  
into her  
essence to a

degree which my intellect is not able to comprehend, for our intellect may be considered in relation to those blessed souls as our weak eye to the sun. . . .

(5) I say that albeit I cannot see whither my thought draws me, i.e. to her wondrous essence, at least I do understand this, that such thought is wholly of my Lady, because often in my thought I hear her name. And in the close of this fifth part I say, 'Dear Ladies mine', to let it be understood that those to whom I speak are *noble souls* (ladies).

Dante employed the medieval conception of the Heavenly Spheres, as accepted by the Church, with great effect in his allegory. He was able by means of it to develop in the Vulgar Tongue without suspicion the mystic truths he aimed at bringing before the men and women of his day who were unacquainted with Latin. He explained concisely in the *Banquet*<sup>1</sup> for the benefit of the ignorant that the Seven Planetary Heavens were situated one within the other in concentric rings, all in continuous rotation, while above and beyond, lay (8th) the Crystalline or Stellar Heaven and (9th) the Sphere of the Primum Mobile. He assigned each of the Spheres in his doctrine to beings (some immortal and angelic, others actually undergoing probation on earth) whose function it was to contemplate some special aspect of the Triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus he assigned the Third Sphere, that of Venus, to the contemplation of God the Holy Spirit by angelic beings and by men of understanding. And according to the scheme he elaborated<sup>2</sup> the Ninth Sphere was dedicated to God the Holy Spirit, 'in respect to God the Son, how parted from Him, how united to Him'. It was on this note that the *New Life* ended. The essence of Christianity may, in truth, be said to lie in the spiritual contemplation of the manifestation to the world of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

To follow out Dante's thought by studying his presentation of the Ninth Heaven, the Primum Mobile, in the *Paradiso*, is to discover a striking parallel with his final sonnet in the *New Life*. In almost the last words uttered by

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, c. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. II, c. 6.

Beatrice she exposed the ignorance, folly and greed of the Carnal Church and its ordained ministers, in startling contrast to the vision of Light and Love which she was manifesting to Dante's eyes in this sphere.

And when Dante rose out of the Ninth Heaven he confessed himself powerless to sing her praise beyond this point :

At this point I must yield myself o'ercome  
More wholly than was ever overborne  
Tragic or comic poet by his theme.  
For like the Sun on sight that trembleth most  
Thus the remembrance of her entrancing smile  
Deprives my memory of its very self.<sup>1</sup>

From the first day when I beheld her face  
In this life, till this sight of her above,  
My song hath never faltered following ;  
But now needs must my poesy desist  
From further following her loveliness  
As every artist must, at utmost reach.<sup>2</sup>

## Section XLIII.

' After this sonnet there appeared to me a wonderful vision, in which I beheld things which led me to determine that I would say no more about this Blessed One, until such a time as I might more worthily treat of her. And that I may attain to this I apply myself eagerly as she herself knoweth in good truth. So that if it be the pleasure of Him, by Whom all things live, that my life may endure yet some years, I hope to tell about her such things as have never been told of any woman.

' And afterward, may it please Him Who is Lord of grace and honour that my soul may pass to behold the glory of its Lady, that is of that blessed Beatrice, for she gazeth gloriously on the face of Him, Who through all the ages is blessed for evermore.'

Dante students are at one in believing that the above wondrous vision indicates the first conception of the *Paradiso*. The Beatrice therein depicted combines in one personality the two figures presented in the *New Life* and the *Banquet* :—the early love of Dante who passed from earth to realms above, and the Lady who gazed down on him from on high,

<sup>1</sup> *Paradiso*, xxix, 85-126.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xxx, 28-33.

the new Intelligence of the Holy Spirit, whom he identified with Celestial Wisdom, the voice of the Holy Spirit. In the act of contemplation God vouchsafes to unite with Himself 'that most noble part of the Intellect which . . . is chiefly to be loved ; the "seed of felicity" ; "the sower of blessedness" ; "which descends into us from a supreme and spiritual virtù"'.<sup>1</sup>

We are led to perceive that the art of speculation<sup>2</sup> brought him not only new perceptions of truth, but the power to harmonise the new with the old.

Spite of the limitations of thought and speech, the act of speculation exalted to this high degree was fitted to bear priceless fruit in the understanding. Whereas the marvellous dialectical powers of the Roman ecclesiastical lawyers resulted in nothing but eternal wrangling and discord, the exercise of the intuitive intellect induced harmony and something like unanimity of belief among all who used this method of attaining to truth. There seems to have dawned on him a perception that all the vexed questions of the day might find a solution acceptable to all by aid of silent speculation.

'We press upward', says Dionysius, 'according to our powers, to behold in simple unity the Truth, perceived by spiritual contemplation. Leaving behind us all human notions of godlike things, we still the activities of the mind. Thus we reach, so far as this may be, into the Super-Essential Ray, wherein all kinds of knowledge so have their pre-existent limits (in a transcendently inexpressible manner) that we cannot conceive nor utter it.'

Into this region of soundless Wisdom, Dante gave his noble friends to understand, he was rapt in contemplation. He brought back from it impressions, rather than actual memories. Yet here alone he could perceive lay the Source of Wisdom, able to dispel erroneous beliefs and impart true insight into Divine Truth. To quote Dionysius once more :

'As ignorance leadeth wanderers astray from one another, so doth the presence of spiritual Light join and unite

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. iv, c. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Many who have attained to widen the range of human thought are found following the same method of absolute abstraction. Sir Isaac Newton, a conspicuous devotee of long-continued abstract speculation, called it 'paying attention'.

together those that are being illuminated, and perfects them and converts them toward that which truly IS ;—yea, converts them from their manifold false opinions and unites their different perceptions or rather fancies, into one true, pure and coherent knowledge, and filleth them with one unifying Light.'

A wonderful vision began to form before his eyes.

A glowing concept began to form in his mind of the *Divine Comedy*, through which he might reveal to mankind what they were forfeiting, to what height they might attain.

First he would present them with an image of the blind life they were actually leading under the influence of blind leaders.<sup>1</sup> He would show them with unsparing realism the cruelty and greed of the usurping powers, civil and religious, which oppressed them, and paint in their true colours the potentates responsible for turning the world to a likeness of hell.

Next he would show them in a vision of Purgatory the manner in which God Himself, a God of Love, must surely deal with sinners. Thus he could at the same time unfold the power of love over the sinner's heart even after death, and strike a blow at credence in the penalties and menaces by means of which an avaricious priesthood sought to increase its revenues.

Lastly, he would study to apprehend such truths as God should reveal to him about Himself and His dealings with man. And in the realm of Paradise, himself interrogating Beatrice, the supreme Wisdom, he would transmit her verdict in regard to many vexed questions about which the erring Church was beguiling mankind.  
 . To this end he studied.

#### VOI CHE INTENDENDO LO TERZO CIEL MOVETE

The Ode which forms the subject of the second book of the *Banquet* contains a highly condensed résumé of the central theme in the *New Life*. In the last chapter of his comment on it Dante unfolded its real meaning with unusual lucidity by exposing the sense in which he made use of certain words. We venture to recapitulate these hints, and incorporate them in the rendering of the Ode below.

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. I, c. 11.

The Soul<sup>1</sup> is the inner sanctuary of the being and in this the old belief was strongly entrenched.

The Eyes<sup>2</sup> were the Intellect, apt to receive the demonstrations of Divine Wisdom.

The Star<sup>3</sup> to whose votaries he addressed himself was Venus, the Star of Love, assigned to the working of the Holy Spirit. Its rays were the Holy Scripture.

Thought<sup>1</sup> with assent indicates belief.

Sighs<sup>1</sup> were doubts.

The First Lady—Beatrice—indicated the Holy Eucharist, round which centred orthodox Roman dogma and many abuses of the Church. Beatrice was doomed to pass from earth.

The Second Lady—the one at the Window—indicated the Unction of the Holy Spirit, impelling Dante against his previous convictions to new perceptions of truth, but at the same time inspiring him with unspeakable consolation.

The Ode recounts the issue of two contrary beliefs which contended within Dante for the mastery.

The first belief clung to Beatrice, who was already in possession of his heart. It was a calm belief which drove him often to the feet of Christ, whence he gazed upon Beatrice—a Lady to be glorified, a Divine Messenger or Angel, visible by virtue of unswerving faith—Beatrice now crowned in Heaven.

The second belief seized him suddenly and cast out the first. It urged him to turn the eyes of his intellect upon a new manifestation of Love, irresistible, Divine. Faith in the sacrifice of the Mass to bring him salvation fled before the all-powerful demonstrations of the new spiritual doctrine, illuminated as it was by the rays of the Star, the promises of Christ.

After great anguish of doubts the victory lay with the New Thought.

Ye, who by eloquence awake in us  
That Love Divine the Holy Ghost inspires,  
Hearken to what my heart is uttering.  
To none else dare I say what rings so new.  
Love, which your valiant words inspire in us,  
Ye noble beings,  
Impels me to the state in which I'm found,

<sup>1</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. II, c. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. II, c. 6, 16

## THE PASSING OF BEATRICE

And speaking of the life I undergo  
'Tis fitting to address myself to you.  
I pray you therefore search my meaning out.

I will tell you of a new thing in my heart ;  
How the sad soul within it doth lament  
And how a spirit speaks opposing it.  
Born of the Love the Holy Spirit sheds.

The life of my sad heart was wont to be  
A calm belief which often took its way  
Prostrate before our Lord where it beheld,  
A Lady to be glorified.  
Of this so ardently it spake to me  
My soul said : ' I must be drawn to this '.

Now there appears what casts out that belief,  
And ruleth me by virtue of such strength  
That my heart quakes, showing it outwardly.  
This urges me to gaze upon a Dame  
Saying :—' He who desires to see Salvation,  
' Let his mind dwell upon this other Dame ;  
' So he fear not an agony of doubt '.

The humble faith which used to bring me word  
Of Messenger Divine, now crowned in Heaven,  
Finds such an obstacle as doth destroy it.  
The soul laments and still is pining for it,  
Saying : ' Ah me, alas, how flies from me  
' This my pious belief which has consoled me '.

This burdened soul saith of my Intellect :  
' O fateful hour when such Love flashed on it ;  
' And wherefore not believe my warning of it ?  
' I said, " In truth he cannot fail to stand  
' " Transfixed by what brings souls like mine to death.  
' " It aided naught that I was ware of it.  
' " Once this gained access to his Intellect  
' " I perished also on account of it ".

' Thou art not dead, but thou hast gone astray,  
' O soul of ours that thus bewaileth thee '.

Thus saith a little thought of noble Love.  
' For this fair Love of whom thou art aware,

CLOSE OF THE SECOND AGE

' Has so transformed thy life thou darest it,  
' So base it maketh thee to see thyself :  
' Behold Love full of pity and lowliness,  
' Wise and most courteous spite of all its grandeur,  
' And in thy thought call it at once thine own.  
' For thou shalt see, if thou deceivest thee not,  
' Examples of such wondrous miracles  
' That thou shalt say :—" O Love Divine, true Lord,  
' " Behold Thy handmaid ;  
' " Be it unto me according as thou wilt " '.

Dante concludes his comment on this Ode with the words :

' And so at the close I declare and affirm (the words have the force of an oath) that the Lady of whom I was enamoured after my first Love was the most fair and noble Daughter of the Emperor of the Universe.' (*Banquet*, Bk. II, c. 16.)



## CHAPTER XVII

### THE HETERODOXY OF DANTE

TO TREAT of the orthodoxy of any other man except Dante, and begin with the statement that he depicted four Sovereign Pontiffs contemporary with himself, Nicholas III, Boniface VIII, Clement V, and John XXII, as usurpers doomed to perdition, would settle the matter once and for all. Dante's method of attack, both in the *Inferno* and in the *Paradiso*, was in this particular singularly free from disguise. Yet Rome has continued in successive ages to reckon Dante among her sons. Boniface VIII loaded him with ignominy, stripped him of all he possessed, and had him condemned to be burnt alive, but he did not so far as is known specifically declare him a heretic. Not even John XXII did that, although he condemned and delivered to the secular arm all who held the opinions Dante had clearly enunciated. Attempts to excommunicate him as a heretic after his death were quashed. Later, it is true, the Papal Legate burned the treatise *De Monarchia* 'as an heretical book', but the account of this proceeding which occurs in Boccaccio's *Life of Dante* was ordered to be suppressed by a later Inquisitor when the 1576 edition of the *Vita Nuova*, to which Boccaccio's *Life* was affixed, was licensed by the Holy Office. Evidently it had become a fixed principle with the authorities that Dante was not to be classed as a heretic.

Honour to those who recognised beneath his burning zeal for the purification of the Church the true catholicity of his heart. But this acceptance as a loyal, though at times a rash and troublesome, son of the Church has led to the assumption that he assimilated all the doctrines esteemed orthodox in his day. And this ill-founded theory has had an extraordinary effect upon the interpretation of his works.

The undisputed fact that much, very much, was condoned in Dante's case, partly on account of the admitted disorders of the times, and partly in deference to the exalted reputation of the poet, ought not to blind the eyes of the critic to the

spirit of independence which animated him and led to his complete rejection of ecclesiastical control. His unswerving loyalty to the spiritual and catholic elements of Christianity should not be suffered to create the belief that he ever surrendered his reason to authority. In the teeth of persecution he insisted upon complete intellectual liberty. And close examination of his works reveals his intention to refute so far as was possible in the obscure diction which alone would be tolerated on religious subjects certain opinions upheld by authority. We venture to submit that it is necessary to revise the judgment of his religious convictions accepted through many uncritical centuries, and take note how far and in what direction his ardent search for truth guided his steps.

Fully to marshal all the passages in his works which testify to his complete independence of certain dogmas current in his day would need a weighty treatise. It must suffice in this place to call attention to a few salient examples.

In the course of her long struggle to Christianise the world the Catholic Church, as authoritative guardian of the truth, early discovered in the spirit of anti-sacerdotalism her most formidable enemy. Once the Inquisition had been set in motion, it was for ever on the alert to discern symptoms among the people of disbelief in the validity of the powers conferred upon the priesthood. It punished with the utmost severity any act or omission which might bear this construction. The Catholic hierarchy offered a solid front to the world. Even its inferior ministers were sacrosanct and above the law. To cast blame upon the prelates was the exclusive privilege of their own colleagues or superiors. To speak evil of the reigning Pope or criticise his utterances demanded instant excommunication and the heaviest expiation. The Pontiff was Divine, and to attack him was blasphemy. It is therefore very significant to find that it was the reigning Popes whom Dante singled out for his main attacks. In his judgment the notorious evils of the Church centred in the Papal Curia. If he could prove that the Pope did not possess these supernatural powers himself, quite obviously he could not bestow them on others. He struck, then, at the Papacy, in accord with the warning which his ancestor Cacciaguida<sup>1</sup> gave him to aim his rebukes at the rulers of the world, instead of spending them upon the rank and file. This was the road

<sup>1</sup> *Paradiso*, xvii, 133.

to fame, but it demanded high courage and involved facing fearful odds.

' This cry of thine shall do as doth the wind,  
' Smiting upon the loftiest summits first ;  
' This shall be no small argument of honour.  
' Therefore within these circles have been shown thee  
' Upon the mount and in the dolorous valley  
' The souls alone that are well known to fame.'

With successive hammer-blows Dante demolished in his treatise on *Monarchy* the fabric of argument on which the Pope's claim to world supremacy had been founded. Small wonder that the treatise was burnt by an over-zealous Inquisitor. It is, perhaps, the most subversive document ever penned in the long story of resistance to Rome. It was written in deliberate defiance not merely of one Pontiff, denounced as an usurper, but of long-accepted Papal claims demonstrated to be unfounded and false.

The Treatise on *Monarchy* was not the only work in which Dante denied Papal authority. Throughout the *Purgatorio* he conspicuously displays as pardoned sinners men whom the Pope had excommunicated. Manfred, whom four Popes had doomed to eternal perdition, is shown to the world a pardoned penitent absolved from the Papal curses, received to grace by a simple cry for mercy.<sup>1</sup> In the same spirit Buonconte, killed at the battle of Campaldino among the excommunicated Ghibellines, is shown in grace with his comrades slain in the same battle. He relates that he was claimed by the Angel of God in the teeth of the counter-claim set up by the Devil on account of his excommunication.<sup>2</sup> In both cases the simple cry for mercy suffices. The only effect attributed to excommunication is to delay the moment when the sinner's purification begins. But this mild consequence of the awful curse is not represented as of any particular account, for these repentant souls whom the Pope has damned walk unperturbed by pain or sorrow, eager only to press forward to their purgation. This was to lift all terror from the curse. It is made indisputably clear that the ministrations of the priest are not essential for the salvation of souls, a doctrine obnoxious to the last degree.

In the thirteenth century the doctrine of Original Sin included belief in the necessary and rightful damnation of the

<sup>1</sup> *Purgatorio*, III, 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 54.

## THE HETERODOXY OF DANTE

whole of Adam's posterity, with the exception of those who are arbitrarily predestined to be recipients of baptism, justification and the gift of final perseverance. Original sin was reckoned a disease, communicated in the act of generation. It was a vice consisting in the tyranny of concupiscence. It was guilt inherent in every member of the human race.

Dante denied this position *in toto*. He is found reiterating that man is born noble. He expounds the Aristotelian theory of the possible intellect, declaring a seed of nobility to be instilled into the souls of all before birth, hence before baptism. He alluded to the doctrine of man's inherent guilt and subjection to concupiscence as a most false and pernicious error. If Adam himself were noble we are all noble ; and if he were base, we are all base. The latter conclusion he triumphantly disproved in the Fourth Book of the *Banquet*, which is mainly directed to a demonstration of Original Righteousness very lightly camouflaged under the thesis (which nobody ever denied) that riches are unable to confer true nobility.

His most beautiful vindication of the human race from the deadly stigma attached to it by the doctrine of Original Sin lies in the words of the great Lombard Mark.<sup>1</sup>

' The simple tender soul comes from His Hand,  
' Who fondly loves it ere it is in being,  
' After the fashion of a little babe  
' That plays, now weeping and now glad with smiles ;  
' Deriving from a Maker, source of joy,  
' It knoweth nothing save that of free will,  
' It turneth to whatever brings delight.  
' It sips at first the taste of trifling good ;  
' There 'tis beguiled and runneth after it,  
' If guide or curb turn not its love away ;  
' Hence came the need to make laws for a curb,  
' The need to have a King who might discern  
' At least the Tower of the true Citadel.  
' The laws there are, but who puts hand to them ?  
' None. . . .

' Well canst thou see that the root cause hath made  
' The world so bad is *evil leadership*  
' *Not Nature*, in you, maybe, corrupted.'

<sup>1</sup> *Purgatorio*, xvi, 82 ff.

The concluding lines are a direct contradiction of the doctrine clearly enunciated in Article IX in the Prayer Book of the English Church: 'Original Sin standeth not in the following of Adam,<sup>1</sup> (as the Pelagians do vainly talk;) but it is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is ingendered of the offspring of Adam . . . therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation.'

Could there be anything further removed from wrath and damnation than Dante's beautiful picture of the Creator, tenderly launching the little souls He loves on to the waves of time, imbuing them at birth with a joy akin to His own, and entrusting them with the priceless gift of free will, that they may follow what is true and good when it is set before them?

Nevertheless, whatever the precise nature of Adam's transgression, it did admittedly introduce sin into the world and set mankind in need of God's forgiveness. Orthodox doctrine, as defined by the great Decretalist Gratian, pronounced that 'it was most firmly to be held that not only men in the full use of reason, but even little children who begin to live in the womb of their mothers and there die, or are born of their mothers without the sacrament of baptism, pass from this world to be punished with eternal fire'.

Dante entirely repudiated this awful assertion with all its implications. In the very beautiful doctrine of the Atonement peculiar to himself,<sup>2</sup> he maintained that 'the human creature, separated from God by the disobedience of the first man and thereby deformed, was restored to harmony with the Divine goodness from the moment when in the most high and united consistory of the Trinity it was decreed

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that Dante brought Adam on to the scene in person to deny categorically the belief that his fall was due to concupiscence with which he had infected the whole race. It was not 'tasting the apple', he made Adam assert: it was his transgression of the mark which had occasioned his exile. It was exactly thus that the Pelagians 'vainly talked'. Adam confessed to having gone astray: his offspring, possessing the same God-given privilege of free will, but enfeebled by his example, followed one another off the track. The remedy lay in wise laws and wise rulers. The problem of Adam's fall is more closely argued out in *Paradiso*, vii, where, disguised in the language of the schools, Dante sets his own theories in the mouth of Beatrice in opposition to orthodox doctrine. He declares the power of God to remit sin 'simply out of courtesy' without any atonement.

<sup>2</sup> *Banquet*, Bk. iv, c. 5.

that the Son of God should descend to earth to restore this harmony'. The Sacrifice of the Son, once determined on, availed to set free the entire race of men from the curse of Adam in all ages before and after the birth of Christ. The sacrifice could not actually take place until the time of universal peace arrived. But it took effect immediately, so that it was efficacious not only for those who lived after the death of Christ, but for all the generations of men from the beginning of the world.

Dante reiterated this doctrine and, as will be shown later, made it the main feature of his illuminating White Rose of Paradise. Its effect on the interpretation of his works can hardly be exaggerated. It set him at liberty to proclaim the divinity of the Roman people, the glory of the Greeks. In impassioned chapters, both in the *Banquet* and in the treatise on *Monarchy*, he exposed their supremacy over the modern, their illumination from on high, their true nobility. Aristotle he declared to be divine, Cato most worthy to be taken as a symbol of God the Father. Far, far indeed were these men from the degradation of creatures shut out from God.

And what of Virgil? Symbol of Reason and of man's natural perfection, no stain of sin rests ever upon him. He was brought out of the ample jaws of Hell, he told Statius, not without a hint of irony, to guide Dante into the right path; a curious comment on the morality of the Christian age. His portion and that of the ancients was in the Elysian fields as he himself had painted them. Short of the Beatific Vision<sup>1</sup> they lacked no manner of thing that was good.

Overwhelming importance was attached by the Roman Church to the graded system of confession, contrition, satisfaction for sin and absolution by way of penances, indulgences, the Sacrifice of the Mass offered with special intention, the invocation of Saints, and supplications offered by priests who were paid by the survivors. All these various steps to the attainment of a condition of grace were obliterated by Dante in his record of purgatory. He shows us one soul after another who has been set loose from his sins by the simple prayer of faith. Very eagerly the souls entreat the

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the allegory Reason was debarred from the mystic realm into which Beatrice introduced Dante. But the Eagle in *Paradiso* xx makes it tolerably clear there was no arbitrary bar to exclude the righteous heathen from the realms of the blessed. If Ripheus, why not Virgil and Aristotle?

prayers of those who loved them in life. Excommunicants were cut off from such prayers by the decree of Rome that it was sinful to pray for those who died under the ban of the Church. Manfred's Mother, Constance Queen of Aragon, was reconciled to the Church in later life, and ceased then to pray for the soul of her son. Dante shows Manfred eager to undeceive her when he implores her aid in purging himself from sin. This was to strike a blow at a pernicious error which grievously tormented the relatives of the excommunicated.

It has been shown that rebellion against the ministrations of evil priests was a marked feature of every anti-Roman movement. To deny the efficacy of prayers offered by such men was the hallmark of heresy. We find Dante openly proclaiming through the mouth of a penitent sinner in Purgatory<sup>1</sup> this forbidden doctrine. Belacqua imploring a prayer 'which may rise from a heart which lives in grace', significantly adds 'what profits the other, for in Heaven it is not heard'.

The whole delineation of Dante's Purgatory is a reasoned protest against Roman doctrine on this subject<sup>2</sup>. The expiatory aspect insisted on by the orthodox is obliterated. Here is no torment inflicted in penal vengeance. Sin is regarded as an infringement of the law of love, and is purified by successive stages—not without pain—of progress in the way of love. The calm, the love and contentment which fill all the souls from the outset, whether excommunicated by the Church or tardy in turning their hearts to God, is an amazing contrast to the terrors depicted by preachers of popular sermons and 'pardoners' greedy for gain.

Throughout the *Purgatorio* we are in a region of very simple Evangelical teaching. The souls who are undergoing purification rejoice in the symbolic forms of retribution which are so adjusted as to turn the mind in the right direction and lift the burden of evil desires from the conscience. The whole system hinges upon love. The penalty of fire is introduced mainly, it would seem, to demonstrate the spiritual quality of God's purifying flames contrasted with the wicked tortures to which Inquisition victims were doomed in this life. The exquisite passage, in which Dante depicts his fear of the purification by fire, is heartened by Reason and, spurred to encounter it by thoughts of Beatrice, seems to be

<sup>1</sup> *Purgatorio*, iv, 135.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Legend of Hell*, p. 63.

artfully contrived to wipe out the coarse conception of God's ways with sinners derived in great part from misunderstanding of the Bible.

Had Dante believed that release from Purgatorial suffering was to be had at the price of bought Masses and the 'Treasure of the Church', it is inconceivable that he would have maintained so complete a silence on these things when conversing with the souls who were under purgation. We are to understand that he believed fervently in the efficacy of prayers for the dead offered by those who loved them, that he believed in the intercessions of 'Mary,' freely proffered, and in the pardoning love of Jesus Christ. That sufficed.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE WITNESS OF THE *PARADISO*

MANY YEARS elapsed before the marvellous vision forecasted at the close of the *New Life* came to realisation. In the first *Latin Eclogue*, written towards the close of his life to Giovanni del Virgilio, Dante alluded in cryptic fashion to the *Paradiso* as the best-loved (*gratissima*) offspring of his genius. Ever spontaneously welcome to his mind, fertile in ideas, lying very close to his heart, the final *cantica* of the *Divina Commedia* grew and ripened slowly, filling its creator with joy as he brooded over it continuously and added one immortal line after another, till he had conferred on it the rare grace of absolute finished perfection. Yet, with all its countless beauties, the impassioned search for truth in the *Paradiso* has passages which have failed to grip the world. The compelling urge with which it pressed on Dante's mind, with distended udders, to use his own metaphor, entreating to be milked, has penetrated to comparatively few. The abstruse arguments of Beatrice and the rest seem to have lost their original vitality. They have come to be accepted as a recondite enunciation of orthodox dogmas, defended it would seem with perhaps unnecessary heat.

But suppose Dante were not trying to clothe in complicated language (he a master of lucidity) dogmas upheld with fire and torture by the ecclesiastics he contemned, but were uttering a counterblast to them? The *Paradiso* furnishes ample material for investigating the religious convictions of Dante. The main doctrines of Joachim and the Spirituals are well known and are not in dispute. They were opposed in many particulars to the doctrines forcibly imposed by the Church on the Christian world during Dante's lifetime. On which side did he stand?

Irresistibly the conclusion is reached that the risen Beatrice of the *Paradiso* is identical with that risen Beatrice of the *New Life* whose glory began to be revealed to him when the New Intelligence of Love whispered her name. We see in her an

image of that intuitive faculty through which God speaks authentically to the soul as a foreshadowing of that spiritual Church of the future which will guide men to all truth, until the whole world will be filled with the spirit of love and peace.

If it be true that Dante adopted the main tenets of the Spirituals, then these tenets or some of them will be found in the *Paradiso*. Joachim will appear as a divinely inspired prophet. The Sacraments and rites which distinguished the Age of the Son will find no mention. The Holy See will be regarded as vacant, the Pope will be represented no longer as Vicar of Christ but as an usurper, the priesthood as degenerate and shorn of authority. Such are, indeed, the significant marks of the *Paradiso*. If, on the other hand, he meant us to recognise in Beatrice the voice of the infallible Catholic Church functioning by and through the Papal Curia exclusively, it must arouse amazement to find both her and her colleagues in the *Paradiso* persistently ignoring the great claim of the Church to hold all approaches to Heaven while they admit as genuine a faith, hope and love founded on Aristotle and the Bible.

A certain measure of caution was essential in preparing to set the *Paradiso* before the world. Although the Curia was no longer so great a political force as formerly in Italy but was functioning with diminished powers at Avignon, it could withhold the masterpiece from any but secret circulation, and eventually no doubt cause it to be stamped out altogether. To obtain free circulation a veil of obscurity must hide some of the most daring arguments which directly controverted Roman dogma. It was indispensable to suggest an air of orthodoxy. But when once the assurance of Dante's submissive acceptance of Roman dogma has been shaken, the spirit of dissent shines out unmistakably in countless directions. In the present critical age it has been largely obscured by the fact that Rome has long conceded many vital reforms which Dante laboured to bring about throughout his whole life.

The *Paradiso* enters into the present theme solely in so far as it supplies evidence of his deep-rooted disaffection towards the Roman Church under its existing organisation, together with his acceptance of certain tenets of the Spiritual or Reform party. We quote but a few of the passages which demonstrate his adherence in later life to the opinions formed

in his youth, probably under the influence of Olivi and his disciples. Deep study of the *Paradiso* affords ever-stronger testimony to what may appropriately be called his Protestant convictions, purged as they were of all fanatical taint and transmuted into pure gold by the fire of his mighty intellect.

The Bull of John XXII, issued from Avignon, February 1315, affords incontestable testimony about the tenets held by the Spiritual party of the Franciscans, by Fraticelli, Beguines and others whose mystic convictions ran counter to the Papal system of religion as by law enforced. Many of these tenets, denounced by the Pope as erroneous and heretical, were quite clearly championed by Dante.

The Bull roundly denounced as heretical the Joachist prophecy of the passing of the Second Age, together with the Joachist distinction between the Carnal and the Spiritual Church.

Dante set Joachim<sup>1</sup> among the Illuminati in the Heaven of the Sun, and significantly assigned to Bonaventura, himself a Spiritual who had, however, set his face against the fanatical element in the party, the office of acclaiming him as a divinely inspired prophet. This was tantamount to declaring that his prophecies had been fulfilled, and that the Age of the Son was ended with all the implications contained in this pronouncement.

The Bull denounced in no measured language all who speak evil of the Pope, and reject the authority of the priests and other ministers of the Church. Dante made a solemn declaration through the lips of St. Peter,<sup>2</sup> brought on the scene for that purpose, that there was now no Vicar of Christ on earth; his place was void, the Holy See vacant. It is not to be conceived that Dante was presuming to challenge by exercise of his own private judgment the legality of successive Papal elections. The words were an emphatic pronouncement that the Carnal Church on earth had been dissolved and the entire hierarchy superseded, beginning from the Head downwards. St. Peter went on to brand the existing Pope as an usurper, who had turned Rome, the burial place of St. Peter,<sup>3</sup> into a drain through which flowed blood and corruption. He included Clement V in his stern

<sup>1</sup> *Paradiso*, XII, 140-1.

<sup>2</sup> *Paradiso*, XXVII, 19 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Paradiso*, IX, 139, where Rome is again called a cemetery.

denunciation of John XXII. He repudiated with indignation the Papal presumption that the Christian fold could be split into two bands, on the right hand and on the left (the latter part to be dismissed to eternal perdition). He inveighed against the abuse of the Keys, which had been turned to a party ensign wherewith to wage war on the baptised ; used, moreover, as a stamp for the seal affixed to lying privileges sold for money (a plain allusion to indulgences for sin), an iniquity which St. Peter declared stirred in him shame and fiery wrath. He asserted that the entire Church had become corrupt. Its pastors had become wolves. What further testimony is required to expose Dante's belief that the Church of Christ on earth had lost its divine commission and in effect was dead? These deeds which St. Peter repudiated were only too notorious. They were the deeds of the pseudo-Church, now moribund. St. Peter summed up its history very definitely. It had had a good *beginning*. Alas, that so vile an *ending* should befall it.

At this denunciation of the Church Beatrice blushed, and changed countenance 'like to a modest lady who, while remaining quite sure of herself, yet only at sound of other lady's backsliding puts on a timid aspect'. We are to understand the distinction between the Spiritual Church of which she was the symbol and the Carnal Church which assumed her garb.<sup>1</sup>

Emphasis is repeatedly laid on the scandalous neglect of the Gospels by the Church. This was a cardinal point among the Spirituals, as among all the seekers after truth. The Bull ambiguously denounced the demand for free access to the Gospels, declaring the Church to be imbued with the Holy Spirit in order that one may be the faith of their minds and the piety of their actions, 'which could not be if the Holy Gospel in which the Rule of the Christian faith is contained were closed to all, and to them (most impudent to dream such a thing) were open'. Dante had this matter much at heart, and protested vigorously in the opening book of the *Banquet* against the belittling of the vulgar tongue, which was made an excuse for the ecclesiastical embargo laid on repeating even the smallest fragment of the Scripture in translation.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *New Life*, Sonnet vi. Exposition—'My Lady as it were in a disdainful manner of speaking'.

In the Heaven of Venus<sup>1</sup> he emphasised through the mouth of Folco the neglect of the Holy Scripture by theologians, who in their greed for money abandoned the Gospels and the great doctors of divinity in order to study the Decretals.

In the final Sphere of the Primum Mobile<sup>2</sup> Beatrice lamented that the laity were deprived of the Gospels, and declared that great indignation was roused in Heaven by the Scriptures being thrust aside and perverted. 'Christ did not tell His first group of disciples, "Go and preach nonsense to the world" ; He gave them the true foundation (His own words) on which to build. That and that only sounded on their lips. And when they sought to kindle faith they took both their shield and their lance out of the Gospel'. Beatrice made it clear enough that it was the Gospel in the language understood of the people to which she was alluding. She went on to pour scorn on the senseless inventions of the preachers licensed by the Church, their jests, their grimaces and the loud laughter which often accompanied sermons in which 'the Gospel is silent'. She clearly alluded to sermons preached to the ignorant. For such, the Gospel was indeed silent ; so great was the dread of translation that the text, together with every passage of Scripture quoted in the discourse, had to be rolled out in Latin, however incomprehensible to the congregation—or the priest. It will be noted that Dante was compelled to follow this rule in the *Banquet* and throughout the *Commedia* where all Scripture references are in Latin. He defied the rule in his very beautiful paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, which has been stigmatised by Eugène Aroux as schismatical.

The Bull of John XXII, without particularising the Joachist doctrine that the Sacraments were to be superseded in the Age of the Spirit, denounces the Spirituals first for despising the Sacraments, and secondly for denying that priests stained with crime can give effect to the Sacraments. This last was the well-known tenet of the reforming party, and was used with effect in days to come by Wyclif. It must appear extraordinary, from the orthodox point of view, that no mention of the Holy Eucharist occurs in the *Paradiso*. On this, the supreme channel of salvation, no word is spoken. The complete silence he maintained with regard to this indispensable rite was the only possible course for

<sup>1</sup> *Paradiso*, ix, 133.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxix, 85 ff.

one who believed it had been withdrawn from an unworthy world.<sup>1</sup>

The Bull asserts in plain words that outside the ship of the Church there can be no Salvation. To the Church alone, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Divine authority is committed whereby men may receive the gifts of Faith, Hope and Charity. The notion that the Holy Spirit guides men to truth and holiness of life through the study of the Scriptures is pronounced to be heresy. The Holy Universal Church derides the pretences of these men.

It would almost seem that the words were directed against the very remarkable doctrines expounded by Dante in relation to his own possession of Faith, Hope and Charity.

There is a dramatic scene in which Dante underwent interrogation by St. Peter on the subject of his faith.<sup>2</sup> St. Peter questioned him closely as an inquisitor might do. He seemed bent on forcing Dante to acknowledge the authority of the Church as sole arbiter in matters of belief. When Dante, in accord with Joachist and Spiritual doctrine, ascribed his own faith to 'the wide outpouring of the Holy Spirit over the Old and New Testament parchments', St. Peter demanded how he knew that this was Divine speech. The orthodox answer should have been 'By the testimony, teaching and authority of the Catholic Church'. But Dante said no such thing. He replied that the proof lay in the works that followed—the miracles of Jesus and His disciples. But St. Peter pressed him more closely yet—'On whose assurance did he know that the miracles had taken place? For they were attested by the very Scriptures that used them as proof of itself'. This was the regular crux on which ecclesiastics depended for the confusion of heretics. But Dante would not be driven to the obvious answer. Instead he leaped boldly out of the net and declared, while the Courts of Heaven rang with a melodious *Te Deum*, 'If the world turned without a miracle to Christianity this alone is miracle so great the rest are not the hundredth part of it'.

Again St. Peter urged him to be more definite, and declare what he believed and whence it was presented to his

<sup>1</sup> *New Life*, Section xxxii, Ode.

Because He saw that this oppressive world  
Was no way worthy of this Holy Thing.

<sup>2</sup> *Paradiso*, xxiv.

belief. And in his final answer still no word about the authority of the Catholic Church found a place. What followed is the veritable Credo of Dante, strangely different from the spurious Credo ascribed to him in later years. It must be quoted fully :

‘ I believe in One God, sole and eternal, Who moveth all the Heaven, Himself not moved, with Love and with Desire. For such belief I hold not only proofs physical and metaphysical, but it is bestowed on me also by the truth which flows down to us through Moses, through the Prophets and through the Psalms, through the Gospel and through you who wrote after the fervent Spirit had made you full of grace. And I believe in three Eternal Persons, and I believe Them One Essence, so completely One, so completely Trine, as to comport at once with “ are ” and “ is ”.’

Finally he gave utterance to the mystic evidence for Gospel truth :

‘ Out of the deep mode of thought Divine I am in touch with now, my mind oft seals in me the Evangelic doctrine ; *this* is the Spark, which so dilates then into living flame, and like the Star in Heaven shines within me.’

Thus in guarded but explicit language he declared the real witness within himself of the Truth to be the mystic faculty (*condizione*) through which there streams into the mind of man Divine Power, Wisdom and Love. This was the end. St. Peter testified his approval, ‘ as a master who hears what pleases him, and embraces his servant, rejoicing in the news so soon as he is silent ’.

Next came St. James enquiring whether Dante had Hope, and whence he derived it. Beatrice herself answered for him : ‘ Church militant hath no son with more Hope ’.

Again we note the striking omission of any mention of the Church as the bulwark of Hope in the Christian resurrection. Dante quoted first the Ninth Psalm, ‘ Let those who know Thy Name hope in Thee ’, a promise which certainly covers the case of Greek philosophers ; second, the 61st chapter of Isaiah, to prove that hope in the resurrection was vouchsafed to the saints of the Old Testament ; and thirdly the Epistle of St. James<sup>1</sup> himself, who, more than any other of

<sup>1</sup> He ascribed the Epistle of St. James to the brother of St. John.

the sacred writers, is found to trust, not faintly, 'the larger hope', and who had given the theologians much trouble by his pronouncement 'that by works a man is justified'.

Lastly Dante is to be heard telling St. John, in language very similar to that used in the *Banquet*, that the desire for Heavenly Love was first breathed into his soul 'by philosophic arguments and the authority which comes from thence', a phrase which amounts to something like a formal repudiation of ecclesiastical authority. More explicitly he avowed that it was Aristotle who revealed to him 'the primal love of all the eternal beings'. Pressed again by St. John, who bade him hold fast to the love he had learnt 'through human intellect and the authorities accordant with it', to declare what other causes incited him to love God, Dante was again silent about the Church. It was the being of the world, his own being and 'the death that He sustained that I might live' which worked with his living consciousness of God to draw him from the distorted to the right love.

John XXII plainly declares in his Bull that outside the Church there can be no salvation. Did Dante in truth hold this belief, which for so many centuries has been attributed to him? On the contrary, he took extraordinary pains to emphasise the fact that he did not.

He posed with this terrible dogma the souls of the just, shining, as a symbol of Divine Justice, in the Heaven of Jupiter, under the image of the Roman Eagle. The eye of the bird, the very core of righteous judgment, was formed of six representative souls chosen to illuminate the page of God's dealings with the human race. The souls composing the Eagle promptly took up the challenge. They well might, for, out of the six they had elected to hold the place of highest honour, only two were baptised; two were Jews, one was a Roman and one a Trojan. Dante had asked where the justice lay in damning a good man who had never heard of Christianity, simply because he had not been baptised. Their answer was an impassioned protest, not, as has been too readily assumed, against Dante for posing the problem, but against the theologians who presumed to gauge and distort the fathomless judgments of God. 'Now who art thou who wouldest sit upon the seat to judge at a thousand miles away with vision short as a span? . . . If the Scriptures were not over ye [note the change to the plural] there would be



marvellous ground for doubting. O animals of earth, O gross minds'. Thereupon, after revealing how eternal are the purposes of the Source of all creation, with which whatsoever is just is in harmony, and hence how God never withdraws Himself from that of which He is the First Cause, the Eagle flapped its wings to rivet attention to its utterance, and circling Dante sang: '*To this realm there rose not ever one who believed not in Christ, either before or after He was nailed to the Cross.*' The words are an exclamation or interrogation—a reiteration of the dogma Dante had sceptically enunciated. And the Eagle went on instantly to refute such an assertion, and in so doing exposed what passage of Scripture he had just been alluding to. 'But see', he cried, 'many cry Christ, Christ, who in judgment shall be far less near to Him than such as knew not Christ. And the Ethiop shall damn such Christians (being set to judge them) when the two colleges shall be parted asunder, the one [the righteous heathen] eternally rich, the other [the unrighteous Christian] bare.' The whole of this pregnant episode hinges on the case of Ripheus, who had nothing whatever to recommend him to grace except the verdict of Virgil (himself a heathen) that he was *justissimus*.<sup>1</sup> The Eagle gave significant justification for his place among the blest. He owed it to 'the grace which wells up from so deep a fountain that the eye of no creature ever pierced through its first wave'. Ripheus 'set all his love below on righteousness', and so 'God opened his eye from grace to grace to our redemption yet to come'.<sup>2</sup> The Eagle went on to declare in defiance of Catholic doctrine, which denied Faith, Hope or Charity to the unbaptised, that Faith, Hope and Charity took the place of Baptism for Ripheus a thousand years before Baptism was instituted. He was, in fact, the very

<sup>1</sup> *Æneid*, II, 426:

Cadit et Ripheus, justissimus unus  
Qui fuit in Teucris, et servantissimus acqui  
Dis aliter visum.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *De Mon.*, Bk. II, c. 8, for this theory of Salvation:

'The world doubts not', Dante had boldly declared, 'that there were those who believed before ever there were any traditions of the Church': 'they believed in Christ, the Son of God, either *that He would come* or while He was actually on earth, or after He had suffered, and believing they hoped, and hoping they glowed with love, and so glowing they became co-heirs with him'.

type of man about whom Dante had desired enlightenment, and here is the verdict of Divine Justice :—'*Who would believe down in this erring world* [the world of dogmatic theology] that the Trojan Ripheus was fifth among the holy lights in this circle?' Certainly the Church, in the person of John XXII would vehemently deny it. But in his *Paradiso* Dante was not endorsing the Decretals—he was setting himself to expose their errors. Where is the justice, he asks, in damning a just man because he has never heard of Christianity? The answer is to point him out highest among the ranks of those just Jews and Christians who proclaim the justice of God. Damned! what fools ye mortals be. Look and see for yourself after what fashion the righteous heathen are damned.

John XXII concluded his Bull by delivering all who held the doctrines, exposed above in the *Paradiso*, to the officers of the Inquisition. All ministers and guardians of the Minor Friars were to seize the 'pseudo-brothers' and deliver them to their superiors (that is the Inquisitors). There were great numbers in remote spots making proselytes, especially in Sicily. He denied to them the name of Christian. He cancelled all their appointments of officers and declared all their acts to be revoked. (It is clear from this that many men of high consideration were included in the ban.) All who had been received into this sect were to be examined 'without publicity or form of judgment' [*i.e.* in secret, with torture]. If involved they are to be punished and, if necessary, the secular arm was to be invoked against them; in other words, they were to be burnt alive.

The Pope could hardly advertise in his Bull the fact that numerous devout and influential Churchmen were convinced that the Papal hierarchy was dying, if not dead, and that the Inquisition system, on which it now mainly relied for support, was the veritable abomination of desolation foretold under the name of Antichrist. But he reprobated in vague terms the dreams 'about the passage of time and the end of the Age', and 'about the coming of Antichrist who they say, with pitiful vanity, partly heretical, partly crazy, partly fabulous, is established *here*'. No thought of reform, or reconciliation with the vast body of Christian opinion which he had outraged seems to have entered the mind of the Pope. Persecution, torture, the sword and the fire were his only weapons, while Dante laboured with all his mighty

genius to set Christian ideals before the world so that 'after him men might offer more acceptable prayers'.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note the extent to which the Roman Catholic Church has tacitly, if not in all cases formally, accepted nearly all the tenets which Dante dared at the risk of his life and liberty to unfold in the *Divina Commedia*.

Foremost among these is the practical renunciation by the Papacy of temporal power or political supremacy over civil rulers. Next in importance perhaps is the concession of the Bible in their own tongue to all Christian people, with the provision of a translation of all the offices of the Church, including the Canon of the Mass, side by side with the Latin version. The Church, we are told, 'tacitly consented to', rather than initiated, this great reform.

The Indulgence system, with its vast opening for extortion, its indefensible influence on men's attitude towards sin, has passed into disuse though traces of it still survive. An immense change has taken place in the Church's conception of God's dealings with mankind. The notion embodied in Canon Law<sup>2</sup> that eternal and excruciating torture inevitably awaits all with few exceptions who lived before Christ came, all the heathen, all the unbaptised, in fact, irrespective of conduct, including even babes who die unborn, no longer forms part of the Roman doctrine, and is even, it seems, in the present day vigorously repudiated. The Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin, on which this notion was based, is no longer accepted. Rome can even admit in the present day that there may be a chance of salvation for all the heretics who in the Anglican and other communions resist her authority.

The grave abuses tolerated by the rulers of the Church in days when priests were privileged to stand above the civil law have been swept away.

Lastly, the Holy Office with its dark powers, its terrors, its manifold crimes and abominable procedure, can now no longer in any country paralyse the Church and extinguish the fruits of learning and piety in her noblest sons. Men have, perhaps, in this age grown too tolerant about a tyranny

<sup>1</sup> *Paradiso*, 1, 34:

Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda;  
Forse, retro da me, con miglior voci  
Si pregherà . . .

See *Decretum of Gratian*; Pars. III, Dist. 4.

that is past, too prone to camouflage under a weak pretence of good intentions outrages committed in calculated brutality, prompted by lust for power and money.

The absence of contemporary protest is responsible for the theory that medieval minds, and, foremost among them, the mind of Dante, endorsed *en bloc* the punitive system of the Church, both here and hereafter. Outspoken protest was in the nature of things impossible. Yet protest there was. It lurks in many a page of 'Gergo', as yet undisciphered, in pseudo love-songs and dark corners of literature. It lies not far beneath the surface of the allegory of Jean de Meung. It reached its climax of impassioned expression in the *Inferno*. But it is the *Paradiso* which manifests most clearly the gulf which divided the religion of John XXII and his 'bodyguard of Inquisitors from the faith of Christ, as proclaimed by Dante.

The final refutation of the Roman dictum that 'perfect baptism' is necessary for salvation has passed almost unnoticed. It has been shown that, in Dante's theory of the Atonement, the Son of God redeemed the entire human race living before and after His appearance on earth. The Cross sent its saving rays back through the ages to the beginning of mankind no less surely than forward to the end of time. To make this clear beyond all possibility of misconception, Dante designed the Vision of the White Rose of Paradise. His guide was St. Bernard, and his choice of this particular Saint is in itself a clue to his opinions of the highest value. For St. Bernard, in the treatise on Baptism, which he addressed to Hugo de Saint-Victor, did his utmost to destroy the dreary tradition that even new-born babes unless baptised must for ever be excluded from God's mercies. Hugo had written to ask him about the assertion of an unnamed theologian that when Christ, speaking to Nicodemus, declared: 'Except a man be born again of water and of the Holy Ghost he shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven', He was promulgating an instant decree which admitted of no exception. Bernard plainly exposed the fallacy which had been grounded on these words. They were spoken secretly, he explained, to Nicodemus. Afterwards Christ said of the Jews who rejected Him: 'If I had not spoken to them they would not have had sin'. We cannot even see the thoughts of each other, how then discern the judgments of God? Who does not know that there were other remedies against

Original Sin in past ages besides that of Baptism? There was an interval when circumcision and sacrifices no longer availed, yet Baptism was unobtainable. Did God slumber during this period? Did He neither redeem nor save any? 'As for infants they are in God's hands—it is not for me to define. Faith, Hope and Charity are not extinct because there is no water at hand.' Thus and more spoke St. Bernard. The full significance of choosing this Saint to pronounce on the redemption of infants can only be appreciated by perusing his actual letter. From it Dante quoted a telling passage to clear up the last doubt which stirred his mind in Paradise.

Bernard is painted as he stood with Dante before the dazzling company of the elect, who are grouped in two equal bands, 'according to the way faith looked towards Christ'.

'On this side wherein the flower is mature in all its petals are seated those who believed in Christ before He came (*venuto*). On the other side, where empty seats are interspersed, stand in semicircles those who directed their gaze towards Christ after He came (*venuto*). . . . Now marvel at the deep Divine Providence. *For either aspect of the faith shall equally fill full this garden.*' In other words, the number of God's elect, admitted to Paradise after the coming of the Redeemer, will be no greater than that of the noble souls who entered into the Kingdom of Heaven unbaptised, in the ages preceding His Birth.

The vision of the redeemed to which Dante attained under the guidance of St. Bernard was in effect an image of God's redeeming Love exerted on behalf of the fallen race from the first days of creation. It was no scanty remnant of Old Testament saints which is here presented to view endowed with miraculous powers of foreseeing the Sacrifice of Calvary. St. Bernard had ridiculed such a theory in his letter to Hugo de Saint-Victor. It was a vision of judgment, in which we behold the Creator triumphant, inasmuch as by many ways He had brought back the souls He had created in Love to their ultimate bliss. In Dante's vision the glorious Incarnation and Sacrifice of the Son dominated the Universe, efficacious from the beginning of man's history. His redeeming Love preceded Creation, when in the High Consistory of Heaven the Sacrifice of the Son had been decreed and the fall of man foreseen. Midway through time the great event had taken place. Most lofty and glorious of

all the modes through which Divine goodness operated to save mankind, the Saviour's death was not the only one. Wisdom had been outpoured upon the Greeks; Justice and Courage on the Romans; instincts of piety and natural virtues implanted in the whole human race. And thus the souls admitted by God's free grace to Paradise in the ages before Christ's sojourn upon the earth actually far outnumbered the total of those who up to this age had followed Him. Deep in their natures had been implanted the Divine seed which brought forth Faith, Hope and Charity. Their sins were remitted by the Saviour Who in the fulness of time was to come down to earth. Baptised Christians were actually so far in a minority in Paradise.

Dante showed special anxiety to vindicate Divine Love and Justice from the imputation of damning unbaptised infants. The Saint pointed out myriad souls 'absolved before they had true power of choice', who owed their seats in Paradise not to their own merit, but to that of their parents. The position of these happy infants indicated that they were not children of Christian parents alone. Their place was in the middle *between* the two bands; heathen and Christian babes alike innocent, and redeemed by their Creator though 'in different grades'. Intently and in silence Dante gazed upon them. And Bernard seeing that he was deep in consideration, and painfully moved by his keen thoughts, promised him a solution of the knotty problem.

Closely scrutinised St. Bernard's solution was far from setting a limit to God's mercies, but followed the reasoning and the hopes he had himself expressed in his famous letter. He began by declaring there was no such thing as accident in God's Kingdom. (In other words, the innocent were not damned because there happened to be no water at hand, or by chance of their birth taking place in a particular age or country.) Not without cause were all these beings set in Paradise who had so swiftly attained true life. The King, Whose Love not even the angels can transcend, creates all minds in His joyous sight and endows them diversely at His pleasure with grace.... And so without regard to their usages (whether Jew, Christian or heathen) they are set in diverse ranks, and differ only in their primal subtlety or wit. Thus in the early ages the faith of the parents sufficed, with innocence, to ensure salvation. When the first ages were

completed the male children had to gather virtù to their innocent wings by circumcision (but, we are to infer, for females innocence alone still sufficed). 'But', said St. Bernard, and who can doubt the implied scorn, 'when the *time of grace* had come, without 'perfect baptism'<sup>1</sup> of Christ such *innocence was retained* down below there.' Of course, on the face of it, innocence could not be kept back 'down below there'. It was only on the assumption that unbaptised infants were *not* innocent that in the Age of Grace they were doomed to damnation. Ecclesiastics, who claimed power to retain sins, were powerless, it is suggested, to retain or hold back such innocence. There is a deliberate contrast between God's mercies in the primal ages and His supposed inappeasable wrath in 'the time of grace'.<sup>2</sup>

The lengthy reasoning with which St. Bernard demolished the case for damning unbaptised infants was ill suited to find a place in these last stanzas of the *Paradiso*. But a sufficient reference to his letter, which might serve to remind readers of St. Bernard's expressed views, is afforded by quoting parts of it verbatim.

He broke off abruptly to supply a surer proof of God's Love, and fixed the gaze of Dante on the countenance of the Blessed Virgin. Nowhere else could be read so unmistakably the disposition of Christ Himself towards little unbaptised infants, of whom He Himself said, 'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven':

'Look now upon the Face most like to Christ ;  
'The brightness of it can alone dispose thee  
'To look on Christ.'  
'I saw rain down upon her face such joy

<sup>1</sup> St. Bernard revealed his broad-minded attitude towards the rite by refusing to re-baptise one who had been baptised 'in the name of God and the holy Cross.'

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that a passage occurs in St. Bernard's letter to Hugo de Saint-Victor which apparently nullifies his previous reasoning on the power of faith to procure saving grace even without baptism. 'To be sure infants, because their age forbids, cannot have faith, that is, the conversion of the heart to God, *nor in consequence salvation if they die without obtaining baptism*'.

But as he goes on to demonstrate that God admits vicarious faith on their behalf, declaring 'there can be no doubt that the stain caught from others can, or ought to be, washed away by the faith of others', the road to salvation for unbaptised infants is still left open. In other utterances St. Bernard was less hopeful about the salvation of infants.

THE WITNESS OF THE 'PARADISO'

' Borne on the holy minds created to fly  
' That lofty realm, nought I had seen before .  
' Held me in wonder motionless like this  
' Nor showed so clear to me what like was God.'

It is on this note that Dante chose to end the long theological discussions of the *Paradiso*.



# TRANSLATIONS

## INDEX OF FIRST LINES IN ITALIAN

### A. FROM THE 'NEW LIFE'

#### *Sonnets*

	PAGE
A ciascun' alma presa, e gentil core	48
Amore e cor gentil sono una cosa	94
Cavalcando l' altr' ier per un cammino	64
Ciò, che m' incontra nella mente, more	84
Coll' altre donne mia vista gabbate	82
Color d' amore, e di pietà sembianti	158
Deh peregrini, che pensosi andate	172
Era venuta nella mente mia	152
Gentil pensiero, che parla di vui	164
Io mi sentii svegliar dentro allo core	111
L' amaro lagrimar che voi faceste	160
Lasso! per forza de' molti sospiri	167
Morte villana, di pietà nemica	61
Negli occhi porta la mia donna Amore	95
Oltre la spera, che più larga gira	174
O voi, che per la via d' Amor passate	58
Piangete, amanti, poichè piange Amore	60
Se' tu colui, c' hai trattato sovente	100
Spesse fiate venemi alla mente	85
Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare	117
Tutti li miei pensier parlan d' amore	77
Vede perfettamente ogni salute	117
Venite a intender li sospiri miei	149
Videro gli occhi miei quanta pietate	158
Voi, che portate la sembianza umile	100

# TRANSLATIONS

## *Odes*

	PAGE
Donna pietosa e di novella etate	104
Donne, ch' avete intelletto d' amore	89
Gli occhi dolenti per pietà del core	142
Quantunque volte, lasso! mi rimembra	150
Si lungamente m' ha tenuto Amore	118

## *Ballata*

Ballata, io vo' che tu ritruovi Amore	74
---------------------------------------	----

## B. FROM THE 'BANQUET'—BOOK II

Voi che intendendo lo terzo ciel movete	178
---	-----